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THE OPEN SKY



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# THE OPEN SKY

by

L. A. G. STRONG

LONDON

VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD

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FAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON

To  
EDEN PHILLPOTTS  
WITH ADMIRATION AND  
AFFECTION



Kilree is a composite place, made up  
of at least four real places: but its  
people are imaginary.

L. A. G. S.



## PART I





## I

THE CAR PLUNGED through the village, throwing sheets of water out on either side. The whitewashed cottages seemed to cower under the rain, drawing their thatched roofs about them. The roadway was deserted.

Then the car's nose lifted, and the bulk of the headland loomed above it. The road climbed swiftly, and twisted, slowing the car's impetuous charge. Waiting till the last second, the driver changed gear. The car checked, the wheels skidded on the loose, stony surface, and with a rising whine the engine pulled against the steep gradient.

When the car was half way up, a sickly yellow stain appeared on the low clouds that were rushing in from the sea. It spread, and struggled upward. The contrast to the dark slope on their right was so immediate that the two passengers turned their heads, and the nearer rubbed at the window with his sleeve. Hardly had they time to realise that the discoloration was due to light, when the cloud tore, revealing a patch of pure, pale green, and a shaft of sunlight reached feebly up, wavered, and was shoved aside by an indeterminate rushing shoulder of cloud. As it passed, the ray caught, high up, a fringe of the last squall: for an instant the flying rain hung like silver hairs, softened to gossamer, and ceased. Then a fresh, urgent stain spread, the cloud smoked and parted, and with a shout of light the sun leaped out across the bay.

The car was screened by a tumbling projection of rock, so that the immediate effect was as if everything on the

side of the sea had gone, and they were bumping above a tide of light. Then through the tilted floor of radiance appeared, like faint unearthly blossoms, the foaming crests of the waves. A darker shadow fell on the car: it swerved, jolted, seemed for a terrifying second to be headed straight for the golden void; swerved again, and burst into the blinding dazzle of the sun.

Another minute, and it reached the summit. The wind caught it at once, blowing it half across the road, making the brilliant raindrops scurry madly on the windscreen. To those inside, it felt as if the wind got underneath and lifted the car, then stood back and jumped at it, trying to buffet it back whence it had come.

Seton Masterman leaned forward to the driver.

"Stop!" he shouted. "My friend and I want to get out and have a look round."

David Heron turned in a flame of anger. The last thing he wanted was to come from under the warm rugs. Before he could remonstrate, Seton was forcing the door open, and a rush of cold air swirled in.

"Come on." Seton was outside, pulling at the rugs. "Do you good."

Oh well, thought David bitterly, as he clambered out, you're my doctor; it's your funeral if I get a chill. He took a step, and stood still, hugging his big coat to him. His legs felt as if they were in running water. Then they lost feeling altogether. His body seemed to become light. At any moment the wind might get under the skirts of his coat, lift him up, and carry him away. He looked piteously at Seton. Why had he let them bring him to this playground of demented elements? Then, as Seton turned and smiled encouragingly, his supplication changed to hatred.

Seton stepped over a frowning puddle, and took his arm.

"Come to the top. It isn't far. You get a grand view over the bay. I think you can see the farm, but I'm not sure."

He leaned forward, holding his hat with his other hand, and dragged the unwilling David after him.

The wind bumped and bellowed. One had to lean forward and thrust with one's legs, stopping every now and then, and averting one's face, to draw in a cold lung-filling draught. Air ran chill along David's body, under his woollen clothes. He gave up resisting, and pressed forward in a spurt of anger, so that the exertion might help to keep him warm.

Seton was making for a rocky knoll, a hundred and fifty yards from the road. It rose right on the cliff's edge, and dominated the scene. In a lull of the wind, David felt a fleeting, weak warmth from the sun.

Before he expected it, they were standing on the knoll. Below them, the headland tumbled in a dizzy cascade of rocks to the sea. A huge bay fell away to their right, its white-fringed arm of breakers swinging off into the murk that still ran low and scowled over the land. David spared it only a glance. Despite his reluctance and fear, his eyes were held by the appalling splendour before him.

The sky had blown apart; light and wind rushed through the rent together. The sea, tremendous, stiff, and formal, looked like crumpled metal, in majestic progress towards the shore. As it came near, the waves swelled, came alive, and caught the light. They curled over, deep shadows beneath the gleaming dissolution of their crest, and then, with a sudden terrible energy, heaved themselves towards the foot of the cliff. At the foot, reaching outwards for

perhaps three hundred yards, two rugged arms of rock made an enclosure like a horseshoe. The waves, hitting these arms, leaped madly and magnificently in the air, and their spray, hurled inland in clouds, hid the rocks every few seconds. But the main energy of each breaker, compressed between the two arms, poured inwards in a tossing, foaming flood, forced by such pressure that it boiled up and gurgled, thick as cream. Next, falling towards a level, it rushed in confusion, an overlapping snowy pothole, to be lost from sight at the cliff's base.

And, all the time, overhead, light blew past them out of the west, till the cliff was the great bull-head of a universe, voyaging against a flux of all the elements, light and air and sound and sea roaring together.

David's senses held by a thread. Identity, feeling, everything was blown from him by this tremendous flood. He felt his eyes dwindle: he became a body pushing behind a coat. Something was happening at one side of him. He turned, and saw Seton tugging his arm.

"You *can* see it." Seton's mouth was ludicrous in distortion. "Just. Look."

David's face must have showed his numbed wits, for Seton bellowed closer.

"The farm. And the cottage. Look. This side of that small dark promontory."

David looked, as at something in another life. He saw the fall of the land, a tiny stone-walled field or two in a pale splash of light, and then, stretching away into the murk, the great arm of the bay. Following it along, in obedience to Seton's unsteady finger, he saw at last, infinitesimal beneath the height of drifting darkness, a white speck. Miles from anywhere, forlorn in a rushing wilderness, it peeped above the sinister white line that marked the fringe of the

sea. Further, past the thick blot of the promontory, there was nothing but that white line to distinguish shadowed sea from shadowed land.

Seton's mouth came close to his ear.

"This is the view Seager painted. You know. In the Tate."

David's mind worked on that, but, before he could protest, Seton spoke again.

"Pity Slieve Mor is covered. You'd recognise it at once otherwise."

Well, David thought dully, I don't recognise it. He turned to make for the car, and at once was blown forward in an undignified trot. Furious, he dug in his heels, and leaned back. Seton took his arm. The driver stood non-chalant, coatless, beside the car's bonnet, his head lifted, looking at nothing. As soon as they returned, he climbed in without comment, and the car started again with a loud grinding and a jerk.

The warmth inside was something David had forgotten. He shrank down under his rugs, expecting to feel a chill seize on him: but, to his surprise, his body, even the surface of his stomach, began to glow under the heap of clothes. He was still blown out of himself, not yet returned to possession of his body. At the same time his lungs, relieved from the pressure of the wind, seemed to expand as if they would force his ribs apart.

"That was grand," cried Seton heartily.

At once David's soul contracted. He would not be prompted. He set himself to resist, not only Seton, but the glow and exhilaration in his own body.

"We won't be long now," Seton said. He leaned forward to the driver. "How are the Brosnans? Have they been keeping well?"

The driver said something inaudible.

"What?"

Again a murmur, which seemed affirmative. Seton said "Good", and sat back. Almost at once, he leaned forward again.

"Owen been fishing much?"

"He might."

"Old Kate still alive?"

The driver grunted, and withdrew into his seat. He was a thin, young man, with a narrow moustache and an angular jaw. Evidently conversation embarrassed him. This was apparent even to Seton, who looked at him, said "Good," again, loudly, and sat back beside David.

"I wish it had been sunny for you to see it first. You can't think what a difference it makes."

"I'm not a fool," David said shortly.

He felt Seton look at him, but kept his head rigid. Then the car, careering down the slope in a series of swaying, irregular bounds, made speech impossible.

The journey to the farm was not as long as David expected. Through the spray-laden air, the place had looked farther away than it was. Far enough, though, thought David, panic leaping up in him: all of seven or eight miles from the last village, and twelve from the little place with the harbour. I can't! I'll go back with him.

The car turned, and lurched up a laneway. David saw a house ahead, low, whitewashed, with a roof of slate, and, beyond it, higher up, a small huddle of farm buildings. Abruptly, the car stopped.

"Here we are."

Seton spoke with forced heartiness, pushing away the rugs. He ducked his head carefully—he had hit it twice

already—and climbed out. Stiff, cursing, David stepped after him.

The brief gleam of sun was over. It was blowing, but nothing like so hard as on the cliff. The air was clean, and there was an exhilarating smell of fresh seaweed. David sniffed, and looked around.

By a gateway leading from the farm stood a little group of people, staring with a kind of abashed curiosity. Seton uttered a cry of pleasure, and hurried towards them.

When they saw him about to greet them, a movement ran through them, as if they were a group of animals uncertain of a stranger's intention, but ready to gambol the instant he proved friendly. Smiles broke on their faces: they came forward—all except one old skinny woman with a crutch, who stood, making gestures with her arms and shoulders, like a person trying to get into a greatcoat.

"Well, Owen. Well, Elizabeth. Well, John."

Masterman's rich baritone rang out cordially.

"Well, Doctor Masterman. It is good to see you again."

Suddenly David's soul shrank. Clothing and flesh seemed to be torn off, leaving him raw and quivering. He could not face the introductions, the scrutiny, the greetings. Moving his stiff lips with an effort, he turned to the driver.

"This my cottage?"

The driver nodded. Seizing his rug, David hurried up the path, his feet slipping on the muddy surface. Nasturtiums, of all foul things. He felt glances boring into his shoulders. It was all he could do not to run.

"David! Come and meet your neighbours."

Seton's voice sounded half amused.

"Later," David barked over his shoulder, and plunged into the refuge of the narrow doorway.



Seton turned to the group.

"Mr. Heron is tired after his journey. He has had a nervous breakdown. This place will do him all the good in the world." He addressed himself to a tall, white-bearded man, who was listening with dignified courtesy. "You remember how tired I was when I came here? And how, after a week, I was climbing Slieve Mor?"

"Indeed, indeed, Doctor."

They chimed in, smiling, agreeing with him, in soft chorus.

"Well—he'll get on just as fast, I expect. Only you must bear with him, at first. Nasty things, these breakdowns."

They agreed again, hastening to show him how well they understood, but he saw from a blankness in their faces that they understood nothing. His heart sank, as he thought of David's violent moods, of his brusqueness, and the havoc they might cause.

He turned to a handsome, elderly woman.

"You will be looking after him, Elizabeth, I suppose?"

The bearded man answered for her.

"We will see to him, Doctor. We will do all that is needed."

"I know you will, Owen. I know you will. And you'll be doing me a good turn too. I'm anxious about him, not only because he's my patient, but because he's a valuable person. You mustn't think there's anything—well—anything queer about him," he went on, watching their faces. "He's just been overdoing things, and wants rest and change. I told him he could find no better place than this, and no kinder people to look after him."

They smiled again.

"And how are you all? How has the winter used you? How's the fishing?"

They answered him gravely, in their musical voices. A short chronicle of storms, of rheumatism, a lost net, the roof blown off a cottage, it brought to him his old discontent with London, his longing to settle down among them and live their life, which had come to him every now and then since his visit close on a year ago.

"Are the lobsters good this year?"

"They are not too good. Donough is baiting the ground."

"Where is Donough?"

"He is on the mainland. He has been away three days."

"Where's Kathleen?"

"She has gone away to Dublin." Several voices answered him. "In service she is, with a high-up lady in St. Stephen's Green. A fine place, she has."

"And where's—what's her name?—Oh yes—Sheila? Is she in service too?"

"Oh no. Sheila is here. She is away some place for the minute, but she will be back."

"Ach. I shall miss her. Never mind. I'll be down again."

"Why? Are you not staying, Doctor?"

"No. I have to get right back. My practice, you know. It can't wait. I shouldn't really have left it for so long."

Owen shook his head.

"You are going straight back? That is too tiring for you, Doctor, too tiring altogether."

Seton smiled.

"Travelling doesn't tire me. I like it. I shall stay a night in Dublin."

The elderly woman spoke.

"Were you wanting to speak with Sheila, Doctor?"

"I only wondered . . . in case she might be helping to look after my friend."

A curious shade, hardly perceptible, came over Elizabeth's face. She looked at Owen, whose face did not change, but seemed to lose expression.

Seton stepped nearer to Owen, and jerked his head towards the old woman in the background, who was still grimacing and making strange bird-like movements with her arms.

"How's she been?"

Owen shrugged.

"Much as before, Doctor, much as before."

As if she knew they were speaking of her, the old woman sniggered, and drew a filthy forefinger along under her nose.

Seton turned.

"I'll just step in and see Mr. Heron settled. Then I'll come back, and have a chat with you all before I go."

He went up the path, feeling them draw together, a silent group, behind him. Turning in the doorway, he smiled resolutely, and waved his hand.

There was no one in the living room. Its air was chill and damp, and an unconvinced fire sent up a thin stream of smoke on the hearth. Seton fumbled his way down a dark narrow passage to the kitchen at the back of the house.

Heron, his overcoat hanging loosely open, his hat on the back of his head, was leaning against the table and filling his pipe.

"Inspecting your new quarters?"

Heron shrugged, and lit a match.

"They appear to be rat-ridden, judging from the noise I heard just now. Perhaps it was my housekeeper, and I

have frightened her away. You *have* provided me with a housekeeper, haven't you?"

"I told you, last night."

"Did you? I can't have listened."

There was a pause. Seton's jaw set. He fingered a leather button on his tweed overcoat.

"I congratulate you on a splendid start. You have certainly done your best to endear yourself to your neighbours."

Heron shrugged again. Seton's voice rose.

"These people, as I have tried to explain to you, are courteous and friendly. They are not accustomed to being treated as if they did not exist."

For a moment David did not answer. Then his face contracted in a spasm of weak anger.

"Damn it all, man, have you no imagination? You know how tired I am, after this hellish journey. You drag me out of the car, and make me stand in the wind, and then, when I am chilled and hurry in to get warm——"

"Rubbish. You didn't get chilled. Do you think, after all this time, I don't know what's good for you? Don't be such a fool." Seton's face was red. "It's you who have no imagination. You never see anything, for a second, except from your own wretched, sickly point of view. That's precisely what's wrong with you—and damn little else."

David lifted a face gray with rage.

"I suppose it's part of your profession to be obtuse. You need it to enable you to bully your patients. Always got to know better, haven't you? Does it never occur to you"—he leaned forward, feeling the table edge sharp against his buttocks—"that I prefer to meet people in my own time and in my own way? That I don't want you always

owning me, like a showman, and putting me through my paces?"

Seton clicked his tongue. Before he could speak, David went on,

"It is conscientious of you to deliver me right to the door, but, as I've tried to hammer into you, there was no need. I'm perfectly capable of managing by myself. All this tutelage, like a mother showing off her little boy—can't you see how ridiculous it makes me? Especially if you return the same day?"

Seton controlled himself.

"Considering that I chose the place, and that I know the people——"

"And that you're responsible for me as my physician. Oh yes. *Go on.*"

"—and that, as you correctly observe, I feel some slight responsibility as your physician, it is reasonable that I should wish to come down and see that everything is in order. As for going back the same day; you know how busy I am——"

"Eminent Harley Street specialist here makes plain his magnanimity, in case patient is not sufficiently grateful."

"My God, David." Seton's mouth twisted with anger. "You are a graceless swine."

"Thank you. I like you better when you're yourself."

"It seems to me, the sooner I go, the better."

"You *are* getting quick in the uptake."

"Perhaps you'll endure my company for so long as is needed to unload the car."

"I might do that. I might even help."

They walked out in silence, and Seton, opening the door of the car, began handing out the heavy parcels. The tins of provisions had been wrapped up, six or more at a time, and

were awkward to carry. David took a load, and went back to the house.

"Mind how you skid on the path," he called over his shoulder.

There was no reply, and neither spoke again till the last load was brought in.

A large piece of raw meat lay on the table, half wrapped in newspaper. They stacked the parcels around it, and, when there was no more room, laid them on the floor.

"I'm not going to starve, it appears," David said.

"Doesn't look like it."

"Have a drink."

"No, thanks." Seton was still injured.

"Come on, you fool. You mustn't mind what a neurotic says. Haven't you learnt that yet?"

Seton's face half cleared. He smiled wryly.

"Evidently not."

"Which is it to be?"

"Beer, thanks. Most patients are impersonal," he went on. "I can't quite regard you as an ordinary patient. I know you too well."

"You'll have plenty of practice."

"I devoutly hope not."

"Going to wash your hands of me?"

"No." Seton was carefully keeping down his irritation.

"I'm trusting to this place to do my work for me."

David glanced at the dribbled window pane. Apart from raindrops, it was crusted with spray, so that one could hardly see through.

"Very cheering."

"Wait till you see it in fine weather."

"I've no choice." Glass in hand, David wandered round

the kitchen. "I think I'll make this my headquarters, instead of the other room."

"The other room is grand in the mornings. The sun comes right in."

"Did you stay here?"

"I did. Elizabeth came and looked after us."

"Elizabeth?"

"The woman at the farm. I told you—there are two brothers and a sister."

"Have they any surname? Or am I supposed to be on Christian name terms with them already?"

"I told you all this before, David."

"You tell me so much that I don't often listen."

Seton drank, and did not answer. David continued to wander restlessly.

"I shall make this room my study. It may inconvenience 'Elizabeth', but that can't be helped."

"Don't tell me you mean to write."

"But of course. Isn't that part of the cure? I shall write, I shall fish, I shall go for walks, I shall prattle with the islanders, I shall drink milk and lead the simple life, and in three months' time I shall either be a credit to my dear friend and physician, or, more probably, have drowned myself."

"A good riddance," Seton was tempted to say. Instead, he stood up.

"I'm glad to see you are prepared to be so docile."

David bowed mockingly.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," Seton continued. "I'll run across at any time, if you want me."

"Generously spoken. I mean it. It's a long way."

"I like travel."

"But your time is so valuable."

Seton looked at him, his face a cold mask. He buttoned his macintosh. Shame pricked David, but the familiar spirit of contrariety kept his tone bitter.

"Sorry if I've been inhospitable. Better next time, perhaps."

My God, thought Seton, as he preceded David down the path. How did she stand him for so long?



## II

DAVID HELD ON to the wobbly gatepost, watching Seton go. The broadshouldered figure, his last hold on the known world, was receding. A moment, and he would be gone. Call out to him, call out, you fool! Bring him back!

Seton was speaking to the driver. If David called, he would turn, hesitate, smile, speak to the driver again, and come slowly back.

"Come in, man. Come in and stay the night. I know you can manage it. I know you've arranged to be away for four or five days. Forget what I've said. You know I don't mean it. Stay, and take me round tomorrow morning, and introduce me to all the people."

There was still time to say it. Seton got into the car. The driver shut the door on him, slamming it twice to make it stay, then got in himself. He leaned forward, gripping the gears. Shout!

But, all the time, David knew he would not shout. The malign inertia which had settled on him, his pride, the stubborn disagreeableness which took charge before he could speak and then spoke for him—he was in their grip. He stood helplessly, hanging on to the gatepost, watching his one link with the world depart offended.

The engine roared; the car rocked, shot forward, stopped, rocked again, then started with a jerk. David made ready to wave, but Seton did not look. Then the car swerved, and jolted up the laneway to the farm. Of course. Seton was going to make his farewells.

And talk to them about his patient! Make apologies for him. Beg their indulgence!

Fury shook David from head to foot. Be damned to them all!

He turned, hardly able to see, and went back to the house. As soon as he was inside, the rage ebbed, leaving him cold and empty. The beer he had just drunk rose sour at the back of his tongue. He felt a craven impulse to put on his macintosh again, and follow Seton up to the farm. It would be so easy. Stop, hear voices, knock on the door—"Yes? Oh, come in, sir"—step inside, see the heads turn, see Seton's face clear: introductions, handshakes, relief so sweet it would be close to tears, and then to sit there in the warm, his soul expanded and happy—

Blast them! Blast them all! I will stand alone, I'm adult, I can go my own way, I can keep my integrity, and I damned well will. Thank you very much, Dr. Seton Masterman. I am perfectly capable of managing my own affairs. I can meet the world without your patronising elder-brotherly arm about my shoulders. You and Alison, nodding your heads together, being oh so sweetly reasonable about your troublesome black sheep. You would love to take her back a good report, wouldn't you?

"He started so well. At first he made difficulties, but I was firm, and he came up to the farm of his own accord, and . . ."

By God, cried David, I'll die first!

But the weakness had to be combatted. Standing still and thinking did no good. He went into the kitchen, found a cupboard, and opened it. It was none too clean. A dead beetle lay on its back in the middle of the bottom shelf. David knocked it aside, ripped the wrappings from the parcels standing on table and chairs, and began to stow

away the rows of tins and bottles. Soup, tongue, chicken, asparagus—do they suppose there's no fresh food in the place? Well, if I eat all this, I won't do badly.

And—he cried to himself again, with a sudden air of discovery—if you don't like it here, you can go home. You're not a prisoner. You've only to order the car, and be back in London in less than twenty-four hours.

Relief flowed warm along his limbs. There, you fool. What have you been worrying about?

All the same, he continued working, rearranging the tins, as long as he could: then went resolutely to his bedroom to unpack, talking to himself, keeping himself occupied until he was sure Seton must have gone.

What if Seton stayed the night at the farm?

He stopped and stared at a tear in the faded wallpaper. There was a hole behind it. How could that have come? Someone must have banged a sharp thing against the wall. He measured distances with his eye. It wasn't the door. It might have been the corner of a trunk.

Oh, for God's sake, take hold of yourself, and don't be like a child.

He began to unpack. The drawers were stiff with damp. Only one had paper inside, and that was dirty. The room itself was clean, though. He laid a pile of underclothes upon the bed, and then prodded it. The springs seemed tolerable. Pulling back the top of the quilt, he inserted a suspicious hand. Damp? No. Chilly, though. Hot bottle indicated. Well, that would be easy enough. The window rattled freely, but he had brought wedges. That was one advantage of being an old hand.

He opened his second case, and felt a pang at the sight of Alison's scrupulous packing. There was something at once irritating and pathetic about it. Irritating, because its neat-

ness cried aloud her organising skill, her attitude to life in general, and to himself as part of it: pathetic, because that care once stood for love—probably, though it had become habitual, stood for it still. For a moment he was dismayed, a child again, unmanned by his distance from that too assiduous nurse who was nevertheless a nurse, a shield from panic and loneliness.

A sound, different from the clamour of the wind, made him look out of the window. Seton's car was lurching down from the farm. It went past the end of his garden path, gathered speed, and disappeared.

David drew a deep breath, and, to his amazement, felt almost happy. Now, at long last, he was alone. Those creatures from the farm, whatever they were, need not trouble him. They would have to accept him, as they had to accept any other visitor who paid them. His foibles, his doings were no concern of theirs. No one was here to watch him. That had been the worst of all: the sense that people were watching, lovingly, solicitously, or with hostility, but *watching*, and looking at one another, and comparing notes afterwards. These yokels might gape, but it would only be gaping.

He began to talk to himself aloud, putting the things away in tidy heaps, telling himself that this was the best place for these, and those would be better there.

It took him half an hour to get everything arranged to his pleasure, after which he went down to the sitting-room. The sky outside had brightened a little, and the room, though still dark, looked less forbidding. The fire had gained, too. One half was well alight, and a small flame leaped cheerfully.

David squatted down, and began skilfully to encourage and rebuild it. He loved fires. His long fingers, as if by

intuitive sympathy, found the right places for the small stubborn coals, and, though at first the flame was hidden, he had the satisfaction soon of seeing it strengthen and begin to burn brightly.

Straightening up at last, he found that his haunches were stiff. Mustn't get rheumatic, in this place. Bad climate for it. Oughtn't to get much, in June. Apt to be coldish, Seton had said. David scowled. The worst thing about Kilree was that it had been chosen by Seton.

The firelight began to flicker pleasantly on the walls. He stretched, and started to explore the room.

There were two easy chairs, one deep and sagging one-sidedly, but not unwelcoming; the other high, made of dark wood and laced with old, yellowed cane, and surprisingly comfortable. There was a bookcase, but David deliberately deferred inspection of its contents. Against the wall, in a corner past the fireplace, stood an upright piano, its fretwork front backed by an old faded bit of silky fabric, crinkled artificially, and torn at one side. David opened the lid, and touched the keys, eliciting the high tinny jangle characteristic of damp and lack of use. He made a face, and shut it. *That* would be no good.

Then, and not till then, did he see the picture. It hung on the side wall, half in darkness. He had not noticed it when he came in first, and the flickering firelight only confused his eyes.

He peered, took it down, and carried it to the window. The frame was of the cheapest, and was split at one corner, but David's whole attention was on the picture. He was looking at the portrait of a woman, almost full-length—of a girl, if it were not for the look of knowledge in the eyes and about the mouth. Striking rather than beautiful, the woman wore the clothes of thirty years before. The full,

folded stuff was painted with astonishing boldness, but it was the face that held David's eyes. The longer he looked at it, the more firmly it took hold on his imagination. He began to breathe fast, felt the corner of the frame move under his hand, and realised that he was gripping it tightly. Shifting his hand, and looking close, he saw that his guess was correct. In the bottom right hand corner, drawn darkly in a shadow of the dress, and hardly visible, were the initials "J.S." in the well-known monogram.

David let out a deep sigh, shook himself, and laid the picture on the narrow window-seat. He squared his shoulders, forced back his head, and walked about the room, as if to shake off the sensations that had fallen upon him. The picture had produced an unaccountable emotion, a sense that over the house was hovering something immensely important; as if a prophetic dream were racing by with the low clouds, and brushing the roof top in its passage.

He forced himself to laugh aloud. The sound was dry and startling: it made him jump.

"You certainly need a holiday," he told himself. "Seton was right."

As soon as he felt himself in control, he went across, deliberately casual, and picked up the picture again. Looking first at the signature, he let his eyes return to the face. Character, knowledge, foreboding, a queer serenity; and yet——

He looked at the hands, and started. They were large and strong. The forearm, too, was muscular, and on its outer side the painter had boldly indicated hairs. David looked again at the face, and realised the central fact of the picture. It was the portrait of someone dressed up. Dress and wearer did not agree. For all its serenity, for all its womanly knowledge, the face belonged to a different background.

Its owner had condescended to civilisation—no, that was not it: had arrived, somehow, if only through misunderstanding, at another order of life, had donned the dress, not ineptly, but as a foreigner speaking a language almost to perfection, yet with a difference. Here was one who never lost touch with her own background, her own island.

That was it. David stared out at the racing clouds. The woman belonged here. Seager had dressed her up, and painted her portrait.

He laid the picture down again, and contemplated this fact, hurled at him from the past. The cottage ceased to be a barren spot on a far Atlantic shore. It became significant, disturbing. It reached to him from the era of that folded dress, from the days of his childhood, the warm nursery, the lamps popping alight one by one in the streets below, the housemaid singing *Dolly Gray*, and *Love's Old Sweet Song* twittering from the musical box. That far period, separated from him by his whole lifetime and all that had happened in the world, jumped suddenly close to him in this remote, unchanged place, where so little had happened, where this portrait was painted only yesterday.

David crossed to the mantelpiece, filled his pipe, and lit it. His hands were shaking. This wasn't just nerves. He knew them and their tricks. This was something profound, something important. Destiny was hovering overhead.

A noise made him start. It came from the kitchen. He stood, his heart beating ridiculously fast. Another noise, a crackling, rustling noise, and sounds of someone moving about. Rats—or the housekeeper.

Laying down his pipe, he went to the door and opened it. "Who is there?" he called.

The footsteps stopped: sounded again: hesitated: then

the kitchen door opened, and a figure came along the dark passage.

David stepped back into the room. In the passage one could see nothing. The figure appeared in the doorway.

For a moment David thought he was going to faint. Standing before him, wearing the identical dress, was the woman of the portrait.

An appalling conviction swept him that he was out of his mind. Then, seeing consternation rise in her face at the sight of his, he came back to himself, and after two efforts forced himself to speak.

"Who the devil are you?" he asked hoarsely.



### III

THOUGH SHE KNEW that her uncles and Elizabeth were somewhere out in the front, talking to Dr. Masterman, Sheila Brosnan bent double as she ran. Her eye, wary as a hare's, scanned the top of the low stone wall, and, when she reached the back of the farm, she dodged behind the haystack, round the manure heap, hesitated, darted across the yard, and fled in the door and up to her bedroom, her bare feet soundless on the steep, shiny ladder.

She heard the murmur of voices away at the front, let out her breath in a swift sound of relief, fastened her door, and flung herself on her bed, where she lay, her hands behind her head. Her breast rose and fell quickly, but after a minute or so she was breathing normally. Sheila led an active life: she was in good training.

In the first five minutes, she hardly thought at all. Relief at her safe arrival dominated everything, and she lay enjoying it. Then, by degrees, she let her mind go back. That was a narrow escape. Mr. Heron had nearly caught her. Who would have supposed that he would come through at once to the kitchen like that?

Sheila frowned at the ceiling. This was interesting, if a little frightening. There was a lot to think about. Something had happened so surprising in its implications that she dared not think of it at once. She had to let it unfold and straighten out, bit by bit, in her mind. There was a big question, first of all, and something even bigger behind it.

She stretched her bare legs upwards, frowning at the splashes of mud upon them. Then, slowly, she laid them down again, and let them go loose. She spread her arms out, and began, from force of habit, to trace a design on the wall with the index finger of one hand. She did this for perhaps two minutes, then let hand and fingers dangle, and faced the big question.

Why had she suddenly decided that she could not let Mr. Heron come upon her in her workaday dress?

She had gone to the cottage wearing it, knowing quite well that he and Dr. Masterman were due to arrive that afternoon. Dr. Masterman had seen her in the dress: indeed, she reflected, with a bitter side glance at her uncle's meanness, he had never seen her in anything else. She knew him, though slightly; she did not know Mr. Heron at all. Yet, suddenly, amazingly, without premeditation, when she heard his step in the passage, she had run, and was half way to the farm before she realised what she was at. It was as instinctive as snatching away one's hand from fire. What had come over her?

Sheila was no stranger to instinctive action, the reasons for which appeared afterwards, but it was seldom as unexpected as this. There was some sort of a hint beforehand, a darkening of her mental sky, a change in the weather. But this came from nowhere. Why?

And, as she walked warily round the question, she perceived the even bigger question behind it. Who and what on earth was Mr. Heron, that his coming should be so important to her?

Characteristically, she let the questions alone, allowing them to settle down in her mind and find their own answers. Sheila's way with the unfamiliar was to give it time. Instead of attacking it, or barking at it from a distance, she

left it to domesticate itself. So, now, aware of these big shapes in the foreground, she withdrew her attention, and looked about her room, as if to assure her spirit with what was familiar.

The room was low, with crooked ceiling and a tiny window. One of the four panes had a flaw, twisting the green hillock she saw through it, and the corners of each were blurred with spiders' webs. Sheila would often decide to clean them away, and, about twice a year, would do so: but, as a rule, either she became interested in the spiders, or only noticed the webs when she was too busy to deal with them. She did not have much time in her room, except for sleeping. Nevertheless, it was her sanctuary: and to it she had brought, like a bird furnishing its nest, her pick of all the oddments, the throw-aways, the disabled belongings at last abandoned by their owners to the dust heap. Most of the objects she had smuggled up there years ago, when she was small, and had become so used to them that she could not see their deficiencies, but accepted them as she accepted her own body.

The iron bedstead must always have been there, and the old cupboard in the corner by the door. The rest she had dragged or pushed up the ladder at one time or another, she could hardly remember when. There was the armchair, a crumpled structure of brown wicker, collapsing backwards on its thick uneven rim. Its seat, always low, was nearly on the floor. If Owen or John were to sit in it, it would fold up altogether in a gale of creaks and sighs. Under Sheila it creaked complainingly, but not in despair. She knew its ways: she could spare it, and spare herself, settling skilfully into it, drawing up her knees and clasping her hands round them. From all points broken spines protruded searchingly, but she had swathed its injuries in sacking, and covered

the whole with a dingy patchwork quilt that smelt of mice, so that she could win comfort from it still.

In the corner opposite the cupboard was her table, a lovely little piece of mahogany, victim of such ill-usage that its gashed, scratched surface seemed to shrink gratefully into the darkness of the corner. But it had spirit still: it stood gamely on three legs, the amputated stump resting in a rough angle made by the two walls. It had a drawer, too, which would open if coaxed, and here Sheila kept her childhood's treasures, shells, bits of glass worn smooth by the waves, a silver ring she had found on the shore, a broken string of beads, and various little bits of things she now hardly knew were there.

It was on the table that her eyes rested longest. She looked at it, as at the rest of the room, without conscious thought. It was all part of her. It, and herself, were all she had.

She sat up, in a single quick movement, and leaned her chin upon her hand. Her lower lip pushed itself out into an obstinate curve. The stranger had come, and she must meet him. But she would meet him in her own way, not Owen's and John's. She had to obey her uncles, but she would choose how.

The lower lip stuck out still further. She frowned, drawing down her thick fair hair over her forehead. For a moment, she looked almost simian. Then her face cleared. She had hold on her confidence again. It was terrible, when she nearly lost her confidence. For Sheila Brosnan there was no guide but Sheila Brosnan. The old people around her were no use: nor, for inside matters, were her friends. They were fine friends. Donough Rourke, big, strong, and fair-haired, was the cleverest fisherman on the coast. Mary Macran knew more than any of the people of Kilree, and had lent

her books to read, real books, good books full of wisdom, remember that, you, Owen, for if I was the stupid little streeler you make out, she would never have wasted her time with me. But Mary was gone these two years. Elizabeth—Elizabeth was kindly in her intentions, but the men overbore her, and what did she know about a young girl anyway, she who had stopped being a real woman this twelve years. Kathleen was gone too: but Kathleen had lived too far off, and was never much use anyway.

No. She hugged her knees, and rested her chin on them, looking at the wriggling damp stain on the wall. She must listen to herself for counsel, for she had no certainty except from within herself. This was a lesson she had learned well, and life was constantly demanding that she put it into practice. It was this certainty that told her when to disobey Owen. He would call her stubborn, and beat her. That was the price, and she accepted it, mentally pushing her uncle below her with each beating, till he had become part of her life in the same way as a piece of the downstairs furniture: nothing more. As for John, it was always good to disobey John!

So, returning abruptly to the two big questions that stood up like haystacks in her mind, she knew that this visit of Mr. Heron had a peculiar importance for her. It did not occur to her to analyse her instinct, much less to suspect it. It was there, speaking to her, and in urgent tones. She received its message, and at once her energy was set upon the immediate object of meeting Heron.

With the snap of clear decision, she sprang from the bed, her actions quick and certain. In a second she was at the drawer of her table, with a skill acquired by long practice, pulling carefully with one hand, and holding the table with the other so that it should not leave its place and

collapse. Soon the drawer was half open, and she could edge out what she sought, a small mirror. The celluloid frame was cracked at the edges, the glass shook loosely and was cracked, and showed her only disjointed segments of herself: but, grimly in earnest, she moved it this way and that, trying to see her hair, her neck, her dress.

The glass showed little, but enough. With a slow, bitter sigh, she laid it down. She was Owen's Sheila, a brown untidy girl in a shapeless dress, a torn unfriendly dress that despised her shape and mocked it. Sheila knew little about clothes, but she knew that this dress and she could never combine to make a personality. In it she was less than herself. It did not help, it hindered—and the same was true of the other dress Owen had bought her on the mainland, the warm winter one. It was much too big for her. She was not so small, she had strong bones, but she was slender. In that dress, she was like a twig in a stocking.

She stood, breathing quickly, her eyes dilating. An idea had come to her so mad and startling that she had to plant her feet firmly on the boards. Then, as if from a touch of a whip, she was on her knees, tugging at something heavy under the bed. It resisted: she jerked her head back, straining, showing two rows of white teeth clenched together. With a scrape and a clatter, the object came—a long tin trunk, the paint flaked off it, the top dented and scarred with rust, one handle crushed against the side. It was not locked, but the lid was wedged down, and she savaged it like an animal, jerking, tearing, bashing at it with the ball of her palm, till with a hideous scrape the lid parted from the tray.

Sheila was panting as she lifted out the contents, bundles wrapped in soft paper, the colours glinting through like eyes. One long stiffer roll she set aside: the rest she laid

on the bed, and began with feverish fingers to unwrap them.

Here were her mother's clothes. For years now, since the day after the funeral, when Elizabeth had handed them over to the small uninterested child, they had lain in the trunk. It was years since she had even looked at them. The pictures interested her more.

She spread the dresses out on the bed, wonderingly, catching her breath. They smelt of the dried bog-myrtle that Elizabeth had folded in with them, and added to it a strange pungency of their own. Sheila uttered a small, intimidated sound. The dresses looked so long, stretched out like that: the colours were so bright, the material, as she took it between her roughened finger and thumb, so finely woven.

She stared and fingered them, doubt swelling to agony. They were so difficult. She did not know how to wear them. But so beautiful, so heartbreakingly beautiful. Tears came to her eyes. This one, with the muslin blouse, tied with ribbons and little silver bells: this wide, stiff belt heavy with embroidery, and the skirt that had a crimson apron. There were headdresses too, but they looked heavy, and she did not know which way on they should go. They were not in the pictures.

She rubbed her feet impatiently on the floor. If her mother were here, she would show her how to wear them. But that was silly: if her mother were here, she would be wearing them herself, and everything would be different.

That was the trouble; there was no one; there never was anyone when she was in a difficulty.

She stood, frowning at the dresses, and gave a loud sigh. Her brow cleared. She would wear the one nearest the window. She could make no mistake there, for the framed

picture, the one she had put in the cottage, showed how it should be worn.

She lifted it reverently, wishing it had been red: she loved bright, berry red. This was dark blue, with tiny dull gold flowers on it. It had frilling, and short full sleeves, and there was a kerchief for the neck.

Her hands were trembling, and she could hardly manage the fastenings. The feel of the soft material delighted her; she threw her shoulders back and held up her head. If she could have seen herself, she might not have felt so confident. The dress was made for a taller woman, of bolder lines. When Sheila had hitched up the skirt and caught it in at the waist with a big safety pin, when she had tucked the wide shoulders under the kerchief, she looked out of place as a rowan in a posy.

Next came her hair. There Elizabeth *had* been a help. She had shown her how to wash it in the river water, how to keep it glossy and fine. If she did not care for it, Elizabeth warned her, it would go into rats' tails or lank greasy tufts like old Kate's. With hands that trembled so much she could hardly hold the comb, Sheila combed it back behind her ears, and wound the curls round her fingers. Why had she not a good mirror? With a fierce click of the tongue, she picked up the wretched circular one, propped it against the wall, and squinted into it, doing the best she could.

Ten minutes later, she was ready. In her concentration, she had forgotten the chance of being detected from below. She opened the door, and listened. Silence. Either they were off somewhere with Dr. Masterman; or he had gone, and they were dispersed; or perhaps—terrible thought—they had all gone over to the cottage to visit Mr. Heron?

That was soon tested. Quick as a mouse, she twisted down through the opening, pulled the door after her, and slid



down the ladder. She heard a blurred step out in the front, and knew it was Elizabeth's. A second later came her harsh voice, calling the chickens.

Sheila slipped out into the yard, and hid in the shadow of a small outhouse, from which she could see the back of the cottage. If her uncles were there, they would be in the living room, in the front. Dr. Masterman's car—where was that? If it was still outside the farm, she must wait. If it had gone, then it was unlikely that her uncles would be with Mr. Heron. In any case, she would be safer over there, in the back of the cottage, than here, where they might call for her, or see her crossing.

Like a shadow she sped back into the house, down the stone flagged passage, and peeped around the open door in front. Elizabeth stood sideways on, feeding the chickens. There was no car in the road.

Back again, she took a deep breath, and essayed the dangerous passage. Picking up her dress—at all costs it must not be soiled—she hopped over the mud to the gate. Here, where both hands were needed for the heavy, primitive latch, she had to bunch the dress all up in front and hold it by pressing her stomach against the wall. Once through, she glanced right and left, and carefully fastened the gate again. Farm bred, she could hardly have left a gate open if death were chasing her. A darting leap across the little muddy lane, and she was safe, under cover of the wall, to pull the heavy stuff of the dress up about her thighs and make her way, bent low, to the cottage.

Free from her danger, she became more daring. Better to edge round the house on the far side, and peep in at the front, to make sure her uncles were not there. No one would see her: the cottage screened her from the farm, and, if there was anyone up in the field, she would see him first.

Keeping the dress clear of the whitewashed wall, Sheila edged round, and reached the living room window. The curtains were half drawn: firelight was gleaming through the gap. Slowly, she leaned forward. At first she thought the room was empty. Then, from the corner hidden by the curtain, a man stepped into her line of sight. He had his back to her, and seemed to be staring at the wall. He stepped backwards, cocked his head on one side, then went towards the wall, and out of her sight. In a few seconds he was back again, a picture in his hands. He stared at it—and Sheila only just drew back her head in time, for he brought it to the window to examine it.

Her picture! How dare he interfere? How dare he take it down?

For a horrible moment, she thought he had taken it down in anger, because he did not like it. Then she perceived that he had seemed interested, not angry, that he had been examining it. She slipped back round the house, went in the back door, and entered the kitchen. In the doorway she stopped in amazement. The place was full of litter: the cupboard door was open, and rows of tins stood inside it, tins enough for an army.

She stared at them, stepped forward, and began to pick up the cardboard and brown paper on the floor. It crackled loudly. She frowned, seeing that a fine big sheet was torn in several places. The string—had it been cut? No: just pulled off.

“Who is there?”

She jumped. It was his voice: Mr. Heron. He had not heard her come. Maybe she had startled him.

She took a step towards the door, hesitated, called up her courage, and went along the passage to the living room.

The man was standing in the middle of the room. At sight of her, his eyes stared; his face went pale, and such an extraordinary expression grew upon it that she put out a hand, fearing he was about to be ill.

Then his lips moved, he swallowed, and spoke, in a loud, hectoring voice.

“Who the devil are you?”

## IV

NO SOONER HAD he spoken than David felt a flood of relief. His eyes had played him false. This was not the woman of the portrait, but a young girl. Surprise, the uncertain light, and the impression the portrait had made, had combined to deceive him.

But the likeness was real, and the dress was an exact replica. A trick had been played on him, a cheap theatrical trick. Someone had sent the girl to dress up for his benefit.

His body vibrated with anger. The girl was staring at him like a fool. He spoke again, his voice loud and harsh.

"Who are you? And what are you doing here?"

Sheila was so busy with her own sensations that it did not occur to her to answer. A note in the voice was familiar; Owen and John often spoke to her with that aggressiveness of tone, that proclaimed a kind of anger she knew to exist, but did not understand. But there the likeness ended. Owen's voice was rough and hard. The stranger's, despite its harshness, was pitched in a key unknown—yet so well known to something inside her that it gave her a thrill of recognition. For the first time in her life, she felt divided.

She stood, looking at him, full of interest and wonder, trying to adjust herself to this new experience.

"Are you dumb, girl? Can't you speak?"

That was funny. She, Sheila, dumb! But of course he might think so, for he had spoken three times, and she had not answered.

She smiled.

"My name is Sheila Brosnan."

"It is, is it? And what are you doing, dressed up in that ridiculous fashion?"

She winced, hurt to the heart. Her pains had been for nothing.

"I suppose you thought it a good trick to dress up like that picture." He frowned suddenly, and stepped forward. "Come here to the light."

He took her by the wrist, drew her over to the window, and inspected her face. She let him do it.

"You *are* like her. Yet you aren't. Oho! I've got it."

His face set unpleasantly, and he stepped back.

"And does Mummy know that her little girl has stolen her dress to play a trick on the new strange man?"

Even as the words came out of his mouth, David was conscious of a shamed surprise. The girl's face flamed.

"You will have the goodness not to insult my Mother."

"Insult——?" David gave a bark of laughter. "My good girl, I'm not insulting her. I'm only asking if she knows what you are up to."

"It has nothing to do with you."

"Oh?" Damn the impudence of the chit, playing her fancy-dress tricks and then lecturing him. "In that case, we won't protract this conversation any further."

She stood, looking at him, a level disconcerting stare. His mouth twisted with irritation.

"Go away, please. I don't want anyone bothering me here. Go away at once, and tell the rest to keep away too."

She left him at that, almost tripping over her long dress as she turned. She had forgotten she was wearing it.

David went to the mantelpiece and began to fumble with his pipe. His hands were shaking uncontrollably. Because the picture had moved him, because he had been interested by the personality of the sitter, the trick had upset him, rousing an anger out of all proportion. There was no need to have spoken so savagely to the child. But there, he thought, with a miserable shrug, how often in the past year and more have I heard a voice speaking from between my jaws. It is time I accepted this changeling, if I cannot put him out.

Shall I go and apologise to her? No need even to apologise. Just say a word or two, explain that she startled me. No. Damn it, have some dignity. *Be* a swine, if you are one.

Sheila, once through the door, shut and held it, as if she feared Mr. Heron would try to follow her. Then she slipped along the passage. The dress rustled, and once more it almost tripped her. She caught it up in both hands, and reached the doorway. A soft sound greeted her. It was raining.

At the same moment she heard the tick of the big clock, specially wound that morning. Hopping across, she saw that it said ten to seven, and remembered that Owen had said Mr. Heron would want food, and she must cook it for him.

To her astonishment, this recollection made her feel happy. She gave a little skip of pleasure, and went into the kitchen. There, on the table, was the great piece of lamb that Owen had told her to roast. It should have been in the oven an hour ago. She ran to the range, opened the oven door, and drew back quickly. It was hot: that was lucky.

Mercy, what a plenty of tins and jars and bottles the man

had! There was another lot on the floor. Where would she put them? Never mind that now: there was too much else to do. She crossed to the sink. There were the potatoes John had brought in, caked with mud, the way he always left them.

Sheila stood in the middle of the crowded kitchen, once again a prey to indecision, the thing she had never known till this afternoon. She might risk going back to the farm, but she would surely be seen, and the dinner be late. She could stay here and do her best with the meal; but—here she tossed back her hair and her lip quivered—how could she cook a meal in her mother's beautiful dress?

With her characteristic spring into action, she unhooked the bulky skirt and let it fall in a heap. She fingered the shorter underskirt. It was as good as her own dress, only it had no top, and she could not work in these big flouncy sleeves.

She slipped off the blouse, shivered in spite of the heat, glanced round anxiously, and ran to the porch. Yes—there it was. She had seen it as she came in, a macintosh with a belt. She pulled it off the peg, whipped it round her shoulders, and, with a grimace at its clammy touch, thrust her arms into the wide sleeves.

Everything was too big for her, she thought ruefully, as she rolled the sleeves up to the elbows: yet she wasn't so small. She buckled the belt as tightly as she could, tied it into a knot, and hopped back into the kitchen. She stood for a moment, listening. There was no sound. He had not heard her. She must be quiet, in case he came in and spoke roughly to her again.

Pausing only to kick aside the blue dress, which she suddenly hated, she set to work on the dirty potatoes and

on a draggled cabbage, full of caterpillars, which lay beside them.

She peeled the potatoes badly, taking the best part off with her knife. She did all housework badly. Try as she would, she could find no interest in it. Yet she knew she was not a fool. It was the wrong work for her. Her misfortune, her cross was that she had no aptitude for the things she was asked to do, and nothing was ever asked of her that she *could* do.

One day, she remembered it well, she had felt wings of power within her, and had turned to Owen, who was mending a lobster-pot in the sun, and said to him that there must surely be things she could do better than helping on the farm. The old man had been in quiet mood, or she would never have dared: but she gave a wriggle now at the memory of his blackening face, and the fury of his reply.

"If there are, it is not here you will do them: I pledge you that."

Ah, where was the sense! He was often that way. There was a gulf between herself and the old people, and, in this lonely place, there was no one else. As soon as children grew, they made off to the mainland. It was like that over the whole island. There was nothing but old people in it.

A livid saffron light splashed Sheila's hands, and, looking up, she saw that the sky had broken. Hillock and turf stack stared in an unearthly splendour. She stopped, gazed till her eyes were filled, and then, looking down, could not see *her* hands or the last potato.

There: they were done. She dropped the potatoes in the pot of clear water, and attacked the cabbage. For herself, she would not bother about the caterpillars. They were



easiest picked out after boiling, but a gentleman would not like to find them.

The leaves creaked, a queer, cool, leathery sound, and over it she heard the scrape of a chair. Then the living room door opened, steps came down the passage, and Mr. Heron stood in the doorway.

He screwed his eyes up against the light, exactly like Mary when she had one of her headaches.

"Have you a clean glass?"

Her heart leaped excitedly. He spoke without colour, as if nothing had happened.

"Yes."

She looked round desperately for a cloth to dry her hands. He saw her predicament, and came into the room.

"I'll get it, if you tell me where they are."

"In the cupboard. On the top shelf."

"Thanks."

He went across, passing close behind her. Conscious of him with every inch of her, she bent over the cabbage. She heard him get the glass, start to go back, then stop. She knew he was staring at her back.

"What the—! Here. Isn't that my macintosh?"

She turned. His face was half angry, half incredulous.

"I found it . . . I had to have something . . ."

She finished with a gesture.

"Well, I'm damned. You dress up in—in that old finery, and take my coat, to keep the grease off it. Blast your impudence! Take it off this minute."

Sheila stepped back, bumping her hip against the stone edge of the sink. Her hand flew up to her neck.

"Off with it—or I'll take it from you."

Blood flared into her face.

"You can't."

"Can't I though!"

Her eyes flickered desperately sideways to where the dress lay on the ground. His jaw dropped: he understood.

"Oh, all right, all right." The child would think he had designs on her virtue now. "Only for God's sake take it off, stop fooling around here, and get out."

She made a queer, fluttering movement with her hands.

"I . . . must put the meat in the oven first."

Before he could stop her, she was across the room, thrusting the loaded pan in at the oven door. She slammed the door loudly, and turned, not looking at him.

"I will go if you like, but I ought to get your dinner ready."

He looked at her, puzzled, undecided. The blood thundered in her veins.

"If that is what you are here for, you must stay, I suppose."

She heard him sigh, and make for the door. She looked up quickly, secretly. To her confusion, he turned in the doorway.

"Wait a moment."

He was gone. She stood, miserable, filled with consternation, with a new kind of fear. What must he think of her? It had never struck her, when she stripped and put on the coat . . . Oh, what must he think! Brazen, immodest: worse, that she was actually . . . trying . . . And a man who was unhappy too, who clearly did not want anyone . . .

Hot winds of shame blew over her. But for his command, she would have run.

Back in the living room, David hesitated, and slowly fetched the decanter which he had been filling. Here was his chance, now, to speak about his arrangements, the times of his meals and so on, to tell the girl just what he wanted. It would save sending for her later on. It would put an end to all the yap and palaver with which Alison and Seton had surrounded him for weeks, which Seton had tried to inflict on him even down here. He was shot of Alison now, and of Seton. He was getting rid of his worries one by one. It only remained to give a few instructions to this girl, and all would be over. He would be alone, free to live his own life, to find himself again, to be healed.

He came back to the kitchen, the decanter in his hand. At once a sense of strangeness fell on him, and constrained him. This girl, and her dressing up: there was something odd here, and he did not *want* anything odd. Why to God couldn't they send some ordinary unobtrusive old woman to cook and keep out of sight?

He closed his eyes. He could not cope with anything more. There was only a trickle of his vitality left, just enough to keep him looking after his bodily wants. Not enough to face complications, not enough for contact with any human being. Slowly, fumblingly, he brushed a hand across his eyes.

"I wanted to tell you . . ." he began: and his hand dropped to his side.

Sheila looked up as he began to speak. For a long instant they stared at one another. Then, with a little gasp, Sheila ran out through the back door, and fled to the farm, bent double, running, running.

David stood still, too tired to be astonished. For a full minute he stared stupidly at where she had been. Then he reached out his hand, felt for his glass, poured himself out

a stiff peg, drained it, still staring towards the sink, and left the room.

Old Elizabeth, coming in later to help, with many an impatient click of the tongue, found the kitchen empty and a crumpled blue dress lying in a heap on the floor.

V

THROUGH NO DEFINITE point of severance David floated up from sleep to waking. He felt waves of warmth, flowing upwards from his feet: began dimly to recognise himself, to realise that he had returned from a far, shrouded journey: and passed to a growing awareness of the morning. A poignantly sweet air was blowing on his forehead. He opened his eyes, and found the room alive with light. Light was everywhere—not only the steady, flooding sunlight, but light in movement, climbing, dispersing, crawling on walls and ceiling. He stared, then realised that it was light reflected from the sea.

He shut his eyes again for sheer pleasure, and moved his sleep-heavy limbs, exquisitely aware of each sensation, hearing the noise of the waves, for a while rhythmical, then broken by a pause and an abrupt crash, almost a report: and the sound brought back to him something he had forgotten, the way a single wave will mount past the breaking point, and suddenly collapse. They were making a considerable noise, these waves. The sea must be nearer than he thought. Then he reflected that he had given the question no thought at all.

A thin, wild sound pierced the crashing of the waves. Somewhere away to one side a lamb was bleating. The weak, tremulous cry completed David's happiness.

He opened his eyes, and began to study map-like irregularities of walls and ceiling, the cracks where the paper bulged and formed blisters and bubbles, the places

where it was bleached almost white, and where the damp had blackened it. In one corner was a dusty spider's web, and on his left, spanning the angle of wall and ceiling, another, delicate, silver in the sunlight. The whole room was naked to the morning: the scraped wood of the chest of drawers, the old black rails at the foot of the bed, with the enamel flaking off them, and the brass knobs, one leaning drunkenly: the very flaws partook of splendour.

David lay, waiting for his dream to break. When the tide of peace turned, he would get up. And at once, by an evil trick of the mind, he was back in another bed, waking to such a peace and having it shattered, coming back to life only as to an immediate call to action, a need to harden the will, to flagellate oneself with it as with a knotted cord, and drive the self on.

But that was past. He reasoned with himself, he bade himself lie still. That was past. There was no responsibility here. Here he had only to decide when to get up, what to eat for breakfast—if they were going to give him any breakfast. Be damned to them anyway: he could get it himself—he had only to decide what he was going to do all day, and what hour he would go to bed. That was all. He tried to relax, to let the first mood flow back, but the tensed nerves and muscles would not obey. His peace was spoiled.

And, as he realised it, apprehension grew—that familiar cold panic, that came from nowhere, and would not say what it feared. The walls which had entertained him with their fantastic patterns now threatened disaster. The cobwebs filled him with disgust, the chipped washstand screamed its contrast to the clean, gracious lines of that to which he was accustomed. The dirt, the scandalous neglect—he would speak of it at once, and compel them to redecorate the place. Seton ought to have known better. Very likely they were as

dirty in their cooking too: very likely the drains, the water——

His panic grew, and with it his anger. The cynicism of Seton and Alison, banishing him like this! The sheer selfishness of it! His sense of escape crumpled to nothing, and he longed for the protective and organised luxury of the home that Alison had made. The direst weakling could hold his own in that covering shell. What a fool, to leave it.

"Pull yourself together, man. You wanted to be out of it, and you're well out."

For the thousandth time, he took refuge in physical movement. Springing from the bed, he crossed to the window, and thrust out his head.

Though the little hill on which the cottage stood hid most of it, the scene was splendid. Opposite him rose the promontory he had looked down on from the cliff, a bold, careering hump, between three and four hundred feet in height, descending to a rocky base, and ending in a couple of big detached rocks, ringed in foam. The headland jutted out so abruptly, breaking the slow curve of the bay, that David supposed it must end the estuary of a river. The rising ground hid that, and, if he leaned out further, the farm cut off everything. The buildings looked attractive in the clear, rain-washed air. A thin wisp of smoke rose straight from one of the chimneys, not leaning away inland till it had risen some ten feet clear of the battered chimney pot. On the near side of the farm, a large turf stack glowed with the richest, most vivid dark brown David had seen: and a little gray-brown donkey nuzzled about idly, looking for scraps.

He turned his head, to look straight in front, and was immediately half blinded. The sun splashed full on the sea, sending up from the smoother distance and the nearer foam such a tumbled dazzle of splendour that he could not look

at it. The white sand, the one thing he had noticed yesterday, was dimmed and lost in the great gleaming confusion. It was a relief to look at the green climbing knoll, with its gashes of deep chocolate, and the sparkling rutted surface of the so-called roadway.

He looked away to the left, and saw the arm of the bay recede and rise to the huge cliffs on which he had so unwillingly stood the day before. Beyond them, across the sea, were the dim shapes of mountains: dim, because he could hardly see them against the sunlight. His spirit gave a leap of irresponsible joy. He drew his head back, and began feverishly to get ready, his depression laughed out of existence by the light.

The water in the bath was hot, and the surprise added to his pleasure. He remembered that Seton had held forth to him on the good fortune of having a bathroom in such a remote place. Seager had had it put in.

He heard a movement below, as he shaved. Good. Someone had come to look after him. Not that he couldn't get his own breakfast: but it was nice, this morning at any rate, to have it done for him. He went along to the kitchen, as soon as he came down, to announce that he was ready, and found the room empty, but the table laid, and the plates and dishes on the side of the range.

A large plate of porridge, of which he could eat only half; a fried egg, dark brown and crumpled in appearance but surprisingly good, with some rather strong bacon, and toast; tea of such strength that he had to add three parts of water to it from the kettle; and thick, claggy brown bread, for which, after the first tough bite, he conceived a violent liking; the meal and the oddness of the crockery, the twisted forks, the old yellowed handles of the knives, all increased his pleasure.



I must go and see these people, he reflected, filling his pipe. I am being ridiculous in wanting to keep away from them. I would have made a better start, if it had not been for Seton. They are kindly, I am sure, and they mean well. As long as they don't probe, it will be all right. And why should they probe, you conceited idiot? They have their own concerns, and will leave you to yours.

He got up, and went into the living room. Evidently there were limits to the attention given him. Here, nothing had been touched: there was a stale smell of tobacco and whiskey. Impatiently he emptied the ashtray into the unswept grate, and opened the window.

Hullo. The portrait was back in its place on the wall. Someone *had* been in, then. What a place to hang the thing! No one could see it properly, even on a morning like this. He unhooked and lifted it down once more, and held it by the window, studying it in the full sunlight.

Yes: it was like the girl—had she put his macintosh back, by the way? He must go and see. It was like her, and yet not like her. The woman did not seem so wise this morning, somehow, as in the equivocal light of yesterday. There was knowledge in the eyes, yet they looked at one with the calmness of over-simplicity. The wisdom was of the kind that belonged to places rather than to people: a weather of the features. Where she loved, such a woman might be a fool. Or, was it the portrait of a woman who *had* been a fool in love? That might well be: the wisdom of sorrow, the experience understood, but not what caused it. It was hard to say whether the almost unnatural serenity of the face came from its regularity of feature, or from this inward thing. A fine face, anyway, with the broad forehead under the smooth hair divided at the centre, the breadth between the eyes, the faultless curve of the cheek.

And a consummate piece of painting, to have set down this riddle on canvas.

Damn it, he thought, laying the picture down, the girl has that look too. It was in her eyes last night. That unquestioning look, as of acceptance beforehand. She didn't accept, though—she ran like a hare! Lord knows what she thought he was going to do.

Well: when she cooled down, he would ask her about her mother.

How odd it was here: no post, no papers. They came at some time, he supposed. That was another thing he would have to see the farm people about—arranging for a paper. Heaven alone knew what paper! English papers would be two days old, probably, and he knew nothing of Irish papers.

What it all came to was that he must go and see the farm people. Not at once: it was good to read after breakfast. That reminded him. He had not set out his books. He went up to the bedroom, and brought them down, making two journeys. A severe selection, enlivened by old favourites. Books he had been meaning to read for years.

The bookcase in the sitting room was half full. There were some strange old relics; *Irish Wit and Humour*, *The Famous Trials of Dublin*, the second volume of *Handy-Andy*, minus the back cover, *The Royal Academy of Arts*, 1903, a few battered modern detective novels, which he grimly attributed to Seton—why had Seton said nothing about that portrait, by the way? He was an enthusiastic follower of Seager—a copy of *Weir of Hermiston*, which he set down as Seager's, and opened it in the hope of the small squat initials, but which disappointingly bore the pencilled name of Maguire.

Some would have to be moved, to make space for his

own. Without hesitation, David threw out the detective stories. They weren't even good ones, he noted, turning them over contemptuously.

By the time he had finished, he felt restless, and decided to go out at once. Would it rain? Seton was always insisting that the weather changed with lunatic suddenness. No, it couldn't rain on such a morning. Besides, damn it, that girl had his macintosh. She had run away in it.

He went into the porch, and there was the macintosh back on its peg. The old woman must have brought it, when she made his breakfast. He took up a stick, opened the door, and stepped out into a sea of light.

The light was a shock. It came from everywhere, from the sky, from the sea, from the ground at his feet, where, in addition to the general radiance, it sparkled in a thousand tiny facets. He almost staggered, trying to adapt himself to the wide-openness of the scene, the immense inrush of light, the enraptured freshness of the air that smelt at once of sea and clover.

The sun was higher now. He could see the mountains of the mainland, little more than a vapour, for the light from the sea was still strong, and spray was blowing up from the breakers, making a curtain through which the mountains showed ghost-like and colourless, as though they would vanish with an indrawn breath. David's eye passed along the level sea, where, far out, low and alive, he discerned the dark humped shape of an island.

Stepping out to the gate, he noticed again the tiny twinklings from the ground. He stooped, and found the roadway full of some small gleaming stones, each a pinshead only, dancing with light.

He marvelled, then got up swiftly, with a guilty glance around. They would think he was mad. But no one appeared

to be watching. He must go to the farm. It looked inviting enough in the clear vibrant air, its washed colours bold and——

Then he saw it for the first time, in its full stateliness and beauty: Slieve Mor, the mountain which yesterday had been covered in cloud. He knew it immediately from Seager's pictures, but even they had not prepared him for the effortless sweep, the perfect rising curves, the rocky cone so pellucid against the sky. It astounded him with its grace and power, the way it was withdrawn from the deep-brown peaty moorland, the sudden heave of its shoulder, the soaring, flawless peak.

He stared at it, till exhilaration made his head spin. They were right, he thought, I shall be happy here. Now for the people at the farm.

Less than two hundred yards separated the farm and cottage, but, before he had gone half the distance, David saw that he had left his visit too late. The two men were working up in the fields, some way apart: the old woman was at the back, hanging clothes on a line. They would not thank him for interrupting them, and his mind shrank from three separate sets of greetings. With a sense of relief, which surprised him, he passed in front of the farm, climbing the small slow rise that should give him a full view of the sea.

As he supposed, the headland protected an estuary. Half a mile wide at the mouth, it narrowed rapidly, till, at a place he judged to be a mile away, it was spanned by some kind of small bridge.

The tide was two thirds up, and the river, a streak of virulent green, wriggled between white smears of sand and spread like a crooked fan, until it filled almost the entire width of the estuary, except for a sandbank on the near

side. Its downward weight, with the freshwater streak still dark in the centre, hit the incoming rollers at an angle. The impetus of the rollers, checked by the open beach, edged up sideways into the estuary, was forced higher by the narrowing space, and fell back upon the down flowing current, causing the most fantastic tracery of wave and counter-wave. The high sandbank was licked by a series of criss-cross ripples that crawled forwards and over each other, as if shawls with foaming lacy edges were being drawn from different sides to the top of a snowy dazzling bed. David watched until his eyes were tired. He breathed deeply, swung his stick, and made for the distant bridge.

The little track persisted, growing rougher, tossing and dipping. Ahead were two more cottages, one close to the track, the other above it, sunk like a hibernating toad on the hillside.

He passed the first cottage, almost furtively, lest someone should hail him. The track was intersected by tufts of heather, and finally crossed by a stream, which ran so freely after the rain that David had to dodge about to cross it. Rough going, for those who lived in the farther cottage, he thought: and what must it be like in winter?

Another five minutes, and he was below the second cottage. As he looked, he thought he saw an old, bent shape moving about, half hidden by a wall, at the top of the small stony field.

His foot sounded on a patch of loose stones in the track, and at once, from somewhere up by the cottage, a tornado of tenor barking broke out, and two dogs tore down the field to meet him. If they were savage, he was well placed. There were stones all about him. He stood still, and watched them come headlong down. They did not check, and he was just about to stoop and pick up a stone, when they

slowed up abruptly, and began sidling to and fro, a few yards away, whining and showing their teeth in what appeared to be an amiable greeting. David spoke to them, and moved forward. They backed away, wagging their tails, watching him, still making the whining, eager noise, and barking occasionally to be on the safe side.

He looked up past them, and saw, at the top of the field, an old, bent woman with a crutch, her shoulders curved under what looked like a sack, peering down to see what the disturbance was about.

On impulse David started up the field towards her. The dogs ran miserably to and fro, between him and their mistress, who stood motionless, looking at him as he came.

When he was about fifty yards from her, David began to feel self-conscious.

"Good morning," he called, and waved his hand in greeting.

The result was astonishing. The old woman started, stared, then flung her apron over her head, and, with a piercing screech, turned and scuttled crabwise towards her cottage.

Instantly the dogs' demeanour changed. They rushed snarling at David. He threatened them with his stick, and backed away slowly, staring in shocked indignation at their lean faces wrinkled with hate, their pink bared gums, his ears assaulted by their mean, savage clamour. His retreat flattered their base souls. They came nearer, their uproar sharpened, till he reached a stony patch, stooped, and feigned to throw. Then at once, yelling, they fled, turning again at a safe distance in an ecstasy of baffled spite. For maybe a minute after he had reached the track they kept up their chorus. Then, suddenly, they ceased, and raced back up the field.

David went on, his whole body tingling, not only from the physical noise, which he hated, but from the manifestation of dislike. Vehemently though he might dislike people himself, it was still a shock to him to find himself disliked where his own intentions were friendly. It was ridiculous, as he angrily assured himself, but he felt like a child whose overtures have been snubbed.

By degrees the tingling passed, and he felt at peace again. The morning was too lovely for resentment. He was coming close to the bridge. The ground above the sand consisted of tussocks of grass, rough from salt water, with ridges of dried weed left by the spring tides. Above this came reeds, bare patches of sand covered with little crawling starry flowers, and then the rock-studded green slope, with here and there a stunted alder, leaning frantically away from the west.

David looked seawards along the river. He stared, rubbed his eyes, and stared again. One of the rocks seemed to have podded into something swollen, black and smooth. The pod moved, and he saw it was a seal, sitting up, looking at him. He began to move slowly towards it. It watched him, and he saw, from a series of movements, that there were three or four more on the rocks by its side.

He went on, very slowly, step by step, trying to come as close as he could. The seals grew restive. Remembering that they were said to like music, he stood still, and whistled to them. The heads moved: they were watching him attentively. He could see the nearest clearly now, the upraised dog-like muzzle, the grey whiskers, the bright eye. Then, by a single impulse, the rocks seemed to suffer a sort of rubbery earthquake, and the creatures, with awkward humping movements, wobbled themselves off into the water, falling with a series of deep gurgling plops. They headed seawards,

and he saw them passing, deep blue shadows, over the sand. Then, one by one, the black heads rose, gleaming, to the surface, and turned to look at the disturber of their peace.

David whistled again. Clearing his throat self-consciously, he began to sing. No tune came into his mind but "Mowing the barley".

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid?" he sang stiffly. "Where are you going, my honey?"

The heads watched unmollified. Then, losing interest, they disappeared, one after another. One bobbed up again, and a second, further out, and he lost them in the glitter of the sun.

David turned reluctantly, and began to scramble up to the bridge.

"They didn't think much of your voice, my lad," he said to himself—and jumped as if he had been shot. Above him, motionless, leaning his arms on the wooden rail of the bridge, an old white-bearded man was watching him without expression. Evidently he had seen and heard the whole thing.



## VI

FEELING SEVERAL SORTS of fool, David forced a laugh.

"You gave me a start," he said. "I was trying to see how near I could get to them."

He ran at the slope, slipped, recovered himself, and stood, breathless, beside the old man.

"Is it seeking to kill them you are?"

"Good God, no." David was genuinely startled. "Why should I?"

The old man shrugged, and muttered something to himself. Then, as if relenting, he said, "People do be shooting them sometimes."

"Harmless beasts, aren't they?"

"They are bad for the fishing."

He pursed up his lips, causing his beard to jut out forbiddingly, and looked away. David, with a glance at him, decided to persevere.

"My name is David Heron. I have come to stay at Owen Brosnan's cottage."

"Aye." The old man's face showed a struggle. "How do ye do?"

"All the better for this fine morning." Why does one sound so damned hearty, thought David angrily. "Is that your cottage that I passed? The first one?"

"It is."

"And your name?"

"O'Reilly. Peadar O'Reilly."

"Then we are introduced."

And, with a smile, David held out his tobacco pouch.

At once, and gratefully, the old man yielded to his natural instinct. This was friendliness, and should be met with friendliness. A courteous man by nature, as were all his people, he had been sorely constrained. Owen and John were too hard, too hard altogether. Why, in the old days, a visitor would have meant open doors everywhere, the fetching of poteen from its hiding place, and long talks through the night, protracted in the doorway, with dawn awake in the East. Ah, the old days!

A spasm of caution seized him again, as he recollected what had happened to cut off those days from the present. He filled his pipe with hurried, nervous fingers. Sure, no harm could come from a fill of tobacco.

David watched him. What an old ruffian he looked, with the white hair sprouting almost from his eyes, with the long, sharp nose dribbling on to his moustache, and his sodden, tattered clothing. Yet, with it all, the man had dignity. David marvelled that such a quavering old scarecrow could somehow make him feel that the acceptance of his tobacco was a favour, magnanimously bestowed. I might be a commercial traveller, David thought, trying to get an order out of him.

"Thank ye, Mr. Heron."

Peadar handed him back his pouch, and began to grubble in the recesses of his clothing.

"A match?"

Peadar took the match, cupped his hands, and in a couple of seconds had the pipe going. He drew on it strongly, spat, and nodded.

"That is a good tobacco," he pronounced. "It draws sweet."

"I'm glad you like it."

Peadar had no reply for that. He stood, puffing contentedly. It was David who felt awkward. He eyed the old man, whose face was once more graven and inexpressive. Actually, Peadar was thinking hard. He would not be averse from spending an odd half-hour in the stranger's company—provided always that no advantage was taken of his good will. No trying to come round him to labour at building a house, no bribing of him with whiskey to act as a go-between. Aye, and no taking of liberties, either: no jokes about his marrying Elizabeth, or old Kate, the dirty old . . . You could never tell, with strangers. It had happened once, and it could happen again.

Ah well, he would be on his guard so. A pipe and a civil word tied him to nothing. The tobacco had a grand flavour; it did credit to the man. It was months since he had been himself to the town to buy a stick.

He stared at David, happy in his pipe, with no wish to break the companionable silence.

David fidgeted, anxious to break it, and not knowing how. He must try and find out something from the old man. He said at last, with difficulty,

"I suppose there are many days here when you can't see the mountain at all?"

"Slieve Mor? Aye. When it rains, you cannot see anything."

"It must be maddening if one is trying to paint." It was the clumsiest of leads, and he knew it. "I hear you had a painter staying here, a long time ago. I knew some of his work, particularly the paintings of the country round here. It was they that made me want to come."

He stumbled on, aware that Peadar was drawing away from him.

"There is a portrait in my room at the cottage. It looks to me like this man's work. Seager, his name was. But he was a landscape painter, and his work is so well known now that this could never have escaped the collectors, if it was genuine. Can you tell me anything about it?"

The silence that followed had an edge like a knife. At the first mention of Seager, Peadar knew that his relaxation into friendliness had been a yield to the devil. Owen had the right of it. He glanced warily at David, a veiled flicker of the eyes, and his face shut over like a clam.

"I do not know about any pictures."

You've gone about it too directly, you fool, David said to himself. He smiled.

"You must know the history of everyone living here. You could tell stories that would make a fine book, I'll be bound."

The old man gulped in his effort to resist the bait. More by luck than skill, David had hit upon his greatest weakness. His withered lips worked: then he pursed them up sharply.

"Sheila Brosnan, now," David coaxed him. "The girl that comes to look after me. She is not the sort one would expect to find here."

Peadar straightened himself with a jerk, and a streak of pain shot across his shoulders. He muttered a curse. The stranger's barefaced words had made him forget his rheumatism. He knew now, past all doubt. First Seager, then the girl.

Peadar sighed. No more of the flavoursome tobacco.

"I bid you good day now," he said stiffly, and turned away, groaning at the trick that had been played upon him.

David looked after him, puzzled. The old chap had seemed friendly enough until he mentioned Seager. What

had Seager done to him? Some row, perhaps: some grievance.

He watched the bent retreating back, and realised that he must not let Peadar leave him like this, or it would be impossible to approach him again.

He caught up with him in a few strides, and spoke cheerfully as if unaware of any difficulty.

"Tell me about the fishing, Peadar. I have rented the rights here. Are there trout in the river?"

Peadar half turned his head.

"There is fish enough in it," he replied unwillingly. "But it's not yourself will get them."

This time his hostility was obvious. David stopped, watched him hobble a few paces, then turned and crossed the wooden bridge. He was interested rather than cast down by the encounter. Here was a man who alienated one as he himself alienated people, who wouldn't be probed or interfered with. And quite right too, David thought, his spirits rising. Why should he? Evidently there was some mystery about the picture, and about Sheila. Well—it would be fun to find it out. Something to do; an interest in life.

He stopped, wondering which way to go. The path along the headland did not promise much. He could see where it went. Better cut up across the neck, and see what lay on the other side.

The slope was steep, short grass covered with bracken. Reaching the top, he saw a new prospect altogether: the rest of the large bay, in which his headland was the only break, rising up again to cliffs at the end, and broken off like a wall against the bare Atlantic. Not far in front, surprising in this wide sandy interlude, were three or four small islands, two of them no more than rocks. Except for a

ruin of some sort—it looked like a church—standing starkly facing the sea, about half a mile to his right, the whole stretch bore no sign of man or his works.

Turning round, David looked back. Kilree was revealed as a tiny settlement of four houses: the two near the bridge, and a good way farther off, the farm and the cottage. There were two other houses in sight, each some distance away, which might, he supposed, belong to it. One of them was away inland, some distance up towards the lower slopes of the mountain: the other lay a long way off, down on the shore, more than half way towards the headland. It appeared to be close to the road, but he had not noticed it the day before. With his eye he followed the road along the level shore until, in a slanting streak, it began to climb the long headland, and was lost.

What a height the headland was! It looked much finer from here than from the farm. Slieve Mor, centre of the island, flung out a long wide arm, that ran down rhythmically as a wave till, joining the downward weight of the lesser hills, it rushed to meet the sea, flung up its head in this last great buttress, and fell, sharply as if it had been cut with a knife, into the white anarchic fury of the waves.

From here, too, he could see the whole movement of the rollers into the Kilree end of the bay, from the point, a mile or so out, where they first took shape, to their last dissolution along the shore. How tiny the houses were, under that sky, overshadowed by that mountain, and before that sea. Well: if solitude were the cure, he had certainly found it.

He turned again, looked at the ruin, and decided to go and see what it was. The distance was longer than he thought. After ten minutes walking he was still short of it. It was a church all right—or rather, it had been: nothing

but the shell was standing. A small rise led up to it. The stone was silver-grey in the sun, with a bleached pallor that almost suggested a skeleton.

He came near, and, despite the warmth of the June sun, felt a shiver go through him. The thing was utterly stricken. The stark walls were bare as if centuries of storm and rain had whipped from them every trace of the past. Coarse grass grew on the floor, with here and there a clump of nettles. The west window was a whistle for the wind. Never had David seen any wreck so empty, so inhumanly forlorn. It might have stood on the moon.

He stepped out, having to keep hold upon himself not to hurry. Only when he was a couple of hundred yards away did he turn and look back. The suggestion of bone was all too apt: the empty window and door had an unpleasant hint of a skull.

What could be the history of the place? Who could have stuck it out there, in the wilderness? But for the four cottages, there wasn't a house within miles.

Then, rounding a hump in the ground, David came upon the answer. Some three quarters of a mile in front of him, the river curved round, and on the slope above it, a kind of foothill to Slieve Mor, stood the remains of a whole village, a long huddle of stone roofless walls, and behind them, still faintly discernible in the distance, the outline of what must have been their fields.

David stood, grimacing in distaste. For an instant, the old familiar panic crawled again in his entrails. He shook himself, turned back, and, keeping well away from the church, headed for the sea.

An hour on the beach, watching the breakers curl and crash, and dodging back from the foam that shot up hissing to his feet, revived him. He wandered along, examining

the shells with which the beach was strewn, till a sharp pang, which he incredulously recognised as hunger, reminded him that it was time to go home.

He went back the way he had come, over the neck of the little headland. The slope down to the bridge was steep: he felt his legs swinging loosely from the hip, as they had not done for a year and more. Telling himself that he was a coward, but that in his present state the indulgence was allowable, he went right down to the river's edge, so as to avoid the old woman's dogs. The going was difficult there: either he had to scramble along the rocks, or plod on the loose sand.

He looked up, to find an easier way, and decided to try the grass just above the rocks. It grew in tussocks, and was dotted with little bushes, but it could not be worse than the sand.

Waiting for an easy rock to cross, he reached the grass. It was boggy in places, where the water from the hillside drained down: and, in each little hollow, yellow iris grew, and the inevitable bog asphodel. He made slow progress, as some of the hollows were mere sponges, and he had to climb up a little to find a place to cross: but it was much less wearisome than rock or soft sand.

He had just decided that he might safely regain the track, when a scent filled his nostrils with a sweet intensity that stopped him. Honeysuckle. He looked about, and saw it, close on his left, clinging to a tiny, stunted tree. Uttering a sigh of pleasure, he made for it—then drew back with a jerk. On one of the knotted boughs, thrust out to meet him, hung a sheep's skull.

The effect was extraordinary. Jutting brutally thus into his relaxed, contented mood, the thing hit him as a crude practical joke hits a trusting child. He felt miserable,



disappointed almost to tears. The skull would not repel him in itself. Had it lain on the ground, he would scarcely have glanced at it. It was the sudden malignity with which it leered out at him from the flowers, the evidence of an ugly mind that stuck it there, that affected him like an outthrust tongue.

He went on up the track, aware that he was tired. At once he remembered yesterday's journey, and felt more tired than ever. I'll put off going to see them at the farm, he thought. Probably they will be at their meal, and won't want to be disturbed. It made a good excuse, but he knew he could not face them.

Hullo. There were signs of life at the cottage. Smoke rose from the chimney, and the front door was open. Oh God: a caller.

Don't be a fool. Pull yourself together. Go in.

His face set in a scowl, he went through the little porch.

There was no one in the living room. He sat down limply in a chair, and stretched out his legs. What was the matter with him? Something disproportionate was crouched at the back of his mind. Something large and ugly. What was it? Oh, damn this blasted depression! Would he never have control of his own mind again?

A quick step sounded in the passage, and Sheila appeared. She wore an old torn cotton dress, and a dirty apron.

She gave him the swiftest of glances, and looked down. David swallowed. His mouth was dry.

"Will you be wanting your dinner?" she said, at the same moment that he got out "Good morning".

There was a brief pause. She looked up, and smiled.

"Good morning, Mr. Heron." Her smile widened. "I was afraid you were cross with me."

David could not find words. Her direct attack, the clear candour in her eyes, confused him.

She shifted her feet.

"Will I bring in your dinner?" she said again.

"Please. I'm hungry." He felt himself suddenly anxious for companionship, for friendliness. "I don't know what the time is."

She gave a quick bird-like motion of the head.

"I don't know either. I will look at the clock."

"Don't bother. I'm quite ready." He smiled at her, desperately trying to make contact. "How did you know when to come, if you didn't know the time?"

"I've been here half the morning. I knew you were fussy about your meals. I mean," she amended, as a look of hurt surprise appeared on his face, "you mind what time you have them."

He stared at her. "Don't you?"

She tossed her head. "We eat when we feel hungry."

"But surely, you have times? You eat in the middle of the day, and then in the evening?"

"Oh yes. But one day it will be at twelve, and another at three, according to the work, or what we are feeling."

"Well," said David. "I like to be nearer than that, so I suppose I *am* fussy."

She smiled. "That was why I came over early."

He got up.

"Let's see what time it really is."

"No. Sit you there. You're tired." She was off in a flicker.

"It wants five and twenty minutes to two," she said, returning as swiftly.

"No wonder I'm hungry!"

"You went too far, and you only just after coming the

long journey. You should be careful of yourself." Her tone was quite severe. Then she smiled again. "I will bring it at once."

She sped out again, and in less than a minute was back with the food.

He sat down, feeling suddenly nervous, but she stood watching, first on one foot, then on the other.

He began to eat.

"Is the chop to your liking?" she asked.

David nodded, his mouth full. "Very good," he mumbled.

She sighed with relief, and made to go. At the door, she turned.

"I am sorry I took your coat."

"That's all right."

"I meant no harm. Here we just pick up any thing we may be wanting. I forgot."

Trying to put me in the wrong, are you, said a corner of his mind. He silenced it.

"It's all right," he said again. "Don't worry about it."

"But you were angry."

"I was surprised."

"You see—I had to wear something. I forgot the cooking might spoil my dress."

"And I thought it might spoil my coat."

"Yes. You see—that is where I didn't realise. We don't have coats that could spoil."

"Well, it's all over, and we both understand."

She smiled all across her face, and gave a suppressed skip.

"Tell me," David said. "Why did you put on that dress at all, when you were coming to cook for me?"

She gave him a quick sidelong glance. How could he be such a fool?

"I forgot."

They looked at each other, their minds miles apart.

"Eat your chop, now," Sheila said. "I will go and see to your pudding. You like pudding?"

"What sort is it?"

She seemed surprised at the question, as if she knew only one sort.

"It is made with rice."

"I'm sure I shall like it."

She smiled, and was gone with a quickness that almost made him jump.

Here, he said to himself, you'll have to watch this minx, or she'll be mothering you and ordering you about like Al—like all the rest.

But the protest was a matter of form only. He was feeling better: and, when she came back, he found himself trying to keep her in the room.

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## VII

THE PLATE WAS overfull, and she laid it carefully in front of him, her tongue curled round her lip. Her thumb made a dirty mark on the rim.

"I hope it is right," she said. "I am not clever at cooking. They only let me come here because I do not manage things well."

David looked up. "*What?*" he asked, thinking he had misheard.

"Yes. When Elizabeth was ill, in the spring, and I cooked for them, Owen and John were very angry."

"They couldn't have been angry if you cooked their meals as well as this."

With a happy, confiding gesture, she sat on the corner of the table.

"It is easier here. There is no one watching, and, if I do it wrong, it——"

"It doesn't matter. Oh yes! That was what you were going to say."

She looked at him quickly.

"You would just be angry," she said, "and speak crossly to me. Then——"

"Yes?"

She hopped off the table.

"Well—if it is cooked as you like it, I am glad. You **must** tell me, and be patient, and then I will improve."

"Don't go away. There are things I want to ask you."

"I must go. I am not allowed to stay here long."

"Why not?"

She shook her head. "I must go," she repeated. "Besides," she added, as an afterthought, "there is my own dinner."

"Of course. How selfish of me. That's the worst of people who have been ill. They think only of themselves."

She nodded. "I know."

"Tell me one thing," he said, as she was going. "When would it be convenient for me to call at the farm, and pay my respects? I haven't seen them yet."

Her face had gone blank.

"Any time they will be glad to welcome you. I will tell them."

"Yes. But that's just what I don't want. I don't want them to stay in specially. I want to know when they will naturally be in."

Her eyes looked vague and scared.

"They might be in about four, or five."

"Good. I'll come then. But don't let them stay in on purpose."

She went, leaving him only half satisfied that she would not disobey. He finished the pudding. It was well enough cooked, but tasteless. He got up, fetched his pipe, then called to her down the passage.

"You can clear now."

There was no answer. He went along to the kitchen, and found that she had gone.

Damn it, he thought, does she expect me to clear up? She might at least have waited for that. He tried to feel angry, but felt instead downcast and neglected. The prospect of a lonely afternoon, with nothing to do, appalled him. And, to crown all, the beauty of the day was fading. A

gray film had come over the sun, and small fluffy pearl coloured clouds were drifting in from the sea.

The glow of the meal left him. He felt tired and rather cold. Well. The remedy was there. No, he said to himself, half-heartedly, let it alone. There's been too much of that. You know what that leads to. He plopped weakly into the more comfortable chair, and packed the tobacco into his pipe. His forefinger felt a size too large. Damn it all, what did it matter? Nobody cared what happened to him. Why shouldn't he drink, if he wanted to?

The depression crept upon him, more swiftly than the film that chilled the sky. Something heavy and dreadful was dragging down his mind, something from the past. That skull had started it: that sheep's skull. Why had it had such a numbing effect on him? It was like the ruined church, a horrid coincidence hammering in his thought that the church looked like a skull. But that wasn't enough to account for it. Something was there, heavy as lead, sinking him: and then, with cold sickness, he felt the room go dark, he fell as in a lift rushing down a black, cold shaft, and was back in another room, a boy of nine, staring at the floor upon which lay an overturned vase of flowers and an inkpot shaped like a skull.

At once the forgotten scene engulfed him, bringing with it the whole atmosphere of an evening long ago, taut with coming storm. All day long it had been growing, pricking at their nerves, till it seemed to the boy, shrunken with headache, that his mother and father, sitting accusingly silent one on either side of him, must at any moment burst into battle, savage as a thunderclap.

Dinner had been eaten in that violent silence. His father made a show with the ill-cooked food on his plate, chewing at it ostentatiously, as from duty. His mother, wearing her

half guilty, half defiant expression, ate hers with as ostentatious a relish. Her hair was untidy, her face flushed and shining from the heat of the stove. She never could manage the household, and her inability maddened her husband. Two or three times a year there would be no maid in the house, and then all depended on how his mother behaved. If she were let alone, she might get temporary help. If his father complained or reproached her, her answer was to do the work herself, with compressed lips, and do it villainously—not on purpose, but because she never could learn. She hated household things: she could not bring herself to grapple with them. To force her meant misery for everyone.

Such was the situation on this particular evening. As soon as the meal was over, David's father, dissociating himself from all responsibility, retired to his study. After an unhappy glance at his mother, who sat, her face hard, staring in front of her, David took up his homework and crept after him.

Neither could work, and each was unnaturally aware of himself and of the other. Furtively looking at his father, who sat at his desk, head in hands, the boy knew perfectly well that he was struggling with his principle, which was never to help his wilfully inefficient wife. At the same time, both instinct and upbringing cried out to him that he could not sit still while she strove with the pile of unwashed dishes. He was furious with her for the badly cooked meal, and even more furious at being put, unjustly and against all reason, in the wrong. He knew, too, that his small son was watching him.

"Stop staring at me. Get on with your work."

David started guiltily, and looked down at the blur of his book. It was an added grief that he, having once



and for all decided on whose side he was, at the cost of whatever anguish, should bring upon himself a rebuke from the father he idolised.

It was perhaps twenty minutes later that the telegram came. It was from his Aunt Lucy, his father's sister, saying that she was arriving late that evening, and could she have a bed. His father opened it, handed it to him without a word, and nodded towards the door.

David rose, trembling, and carried the telegram to the kitchen. His mother was standing over a basin of steaming water, the sleeves rolled up over her white, smooth arms, her generous mouth curled in disgust. She gave him a look that had something impish in it—it was terrible how she could undermine his fellowship with his father, how she would laugh at him and make him feel awkward and ashamed.

This time he defended himself in a recoil of anger. How dared she put them all in this hateful position, grieve his father, and then expect him to share it with her as a joke! He put the telegram on the table, and hurried away before she could speak.

Later, as they sat silent in the great gaunt study, father and son heard her moving furniture in the room above. David's nerves tightened in an agony of apprehension. His mother never by any chance had the spare bedroom ready for a guest. When the members of her own family arrived without warning as their happy-go-lucky custom was, she let them shift as best they could. But his father's family, exacting, correct, expecting order and decorum!

The boy pictured the scene upstairs as if he were there, saw her dusting, scrubbing, polishing, with foredoomed and frantic obstinacy, so that not one speck of dust should reward Aunt Lucy's prying finger. Oh, why did it have to

be like that? Torn in two again, just after he had aligned himself, as he hoped, for ever, David looked imploringly at his father. Why couldn't they all three turn to, and have the rotten silly room ready in ten minutes?

As David's thoughts reached this point, his father got up abruptly, and left the room. David clenched his hands. Nothing, he knew, would infuriate his mother more than help unwillingly given. He thrust his fingers into his ears. He must forget all about what was going on, and finish his work, which he had hardly begun. Yet how could he give his mind to his work, knowing what was happening upstairs?

Why, oh why, couldn't his mother do things in their proper time? And, as he asked the question, his conscience smote him. Young though he was, he knew that the household lacked money, that his father tried to pretend there was enough, if only it were properly managed, and that his mother retorted that she must either be a drudge, or the house must run itself as best it could. He knew the truth of this: he could see it. He knew, too, that his mother hated housework, and that in his grandfather's house in Scotland she had never had to do any. She liked music, and reading, and talking to her friends.

The old conflict was nagging at him, pulling him this way and that. He affirmed to himself, again and again, the formula that he had made in self-defence. She should not vex his father, his good patient father.

His work, his work, his WORK! an essay, the work he liked best. But, to write an essay, he had to sit still, to let the thoughts run out of his mind like water from a bath, until it was quite empty; and then, from some mysterious distant place, the new necessary thoughts would start to flow in, filling his mind, till they were ready to trickle from

his pen to the paper. How could his mind empty itself while those two were together upstairs, while the whole house was charged with storm?

David the man, sitting in his chair, lived through the emotions of David the boy as intensely as if the two were one. The small seaside room, full of pale light, was forgotten. He saw only the lamplit room filled with shadows, the inkstain on the tablecloth, and felt the edge of the chair cold and smooth to the inside of his bare knees.

The boy pushed his book away with a sigh of impatience. The fire was smoking. Mechanically he poked it, and put on a little coal. What were they doing upstairs? For a long time now there had been silence.

The tension grew. Familiar things in the room stared at him as if each were poised above a keg of gunpowder. The silence was frightening.

Unable to bear it any longer, he opened the door, and crept to the foot of the stairs. The landing light faintly lit the stair head. No sound: no voice: no movement. Then, with a suddenness like that of an explosion, he heard above him a heavy thud, followed at once by the tinkle of breaking glass. His heart leaped in his chest in the short silence that followed: then his mother's voice cried out,

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me!"

There was a long pause. David stood, unable to move. A door opened, the top stair creaked loudly, and footsteps came heavily down. Shivering, the boy looked up. He saw his father's bulk, but could not see his face against the light.

He put out a pleading hand, but his father brushed past him.

"Your mother has had a fall," he muttered. "See if you can help her."

He went into his study, and slammed the door behind him. Trembling, David began slowly to climb the stairs. He dared not think what he might find.

As he reached the top, she came out on the landing. She looked at him with a dazed expression. Her hand was bleeding.

"Why are you not in bed?" she said to him absently: and, without waiting for an answer, went past him and down the stairs.

Something seemed to swell in his throat. All the sadness there had ever been in the world came down upon him. He understood it all. Childhood dropped from him. He followed her down the stairs, and into the kitchen. She was sitting in a chair, holding her hurt hand in the other, and staring straight in front of her. He could not look at the hand.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," he said.

She shook her head slightly.

"Go to bed, David. There's a good boy."

He went upstairs, undressed, and got into bed. His feet went a long way away from him and grew small. Then they swelled up and became huge and pressed his leg-bones up through his body to his shoulders, as if they would push him right through the head of the bed. He lay shivering and sweating by turns.

The stairs creaked again. He heard her come up and go to her room.

His throat began to swell up inside again until he thought he would choke. In an agony, he got up, tiptoed out and across the landing, and knocked at her door. There was no answer. He knocked again, and, holding his breath, opened the door a little way. She was kneeling by the bed, her arms thrown out across the counterpane. He saw her hand.

On the back of it was a great purple lump like an egg, and on the wrist there was drying blood. He called to her, but she paid no heed, so he gently closed the door.

What about the room upstairs? Would it be ready for his aunt? It must be, even if he had to finish it himself. He looked at the second flight of stairs, glanced downwards, listened, and tiptoed up.

The door was open. The lamp was still alight. He went in, and all but stepped on something on the floor. Broken glass, and flowers—the primroses his mother had gathered that morning—lying scattered, some of them trampled: a light table on its side, and water soaking into the carpet.

He stared, half dazed, half understanding. She must have slipped, and caught at the table, upsetting it and the flowers. Or perhaps she had had the vase in her hand. But why had they left this mess on the floor? The question beat and bellowed in his ear. WHAT HAD HAPPENED?

Stooping, beginning to pick up the flowers, he saw the skull inkpot his mother was so fond of. She had been given it as a child, and treasured it. In happier moments, his father used to say "Alas poor Yorick" to it, and laugh, and tell her she was a philosopher.

But they had left it lying on the floor with the broken vase and the flowers.

The man David shivered in his chair, and drew a long breath. That was an ancient evil, out of the past. It had no business here. It was a part of all he was trying to forget. Only the mad coincidence of a skull with flowers had, by unbelievable bad luck, unburied it.

He got up, trembling. The room seemed cold, the light vicious. There was a new, menacing note in the boom of the sea.

With a bitter oath, he turned to the cupboard and got out the whiskey bottle. He poured out half a glassful: stood for five or six seconds: and then, his face twisted with self-contempt, poured it back into the bottle. His hand shook; some of the whiskey ran down the side and chilled his hand.

"I can manage my life," he said to the distant Seton and Alison, "without any interference from you."

But, all the time, he knew that he was invoking their names only to stiffen the limp remains of his resistance against himself.

## VIII

SHEILA RAN BACK to the farm, glowing and excited. She looked about her, skipped irrepressibly, and let herself in by the back door into the kitchen. Elizabeth straightened up, and stared at her suspiciously.

Hardening at once under the stare, Sheila stuck out her lower lip and tossed her head. The old woman's mouth set grimly. She was handsome as a hawk.

"Where is it you have been all these hours?"

Sheila opened her eyes wide.

"I have been above at the cottage, getting Mr. Heron his dinner. Where else would I be?"

"You know well you were bid stay there only so long as you need to serve him."

"I was there only so long. He has not yet done eating. I did not even wait to clear up after him."

"You have been gone from this place two hours and more. Do not lie to me."

"Indeed, then, and I am not lying to you. How was I to know when the man would want his dinner? Would you have me keep him waiting an hour, maybe? You know what these strangers are." She gave the old woman an experimental glance. "I know now what hour he likes his dinner. I will not have to stay so long the next time."

She stepped across, and took the broom from Elizabeth's hand.

"Dear Grandy." It was the pet name she had used as a child. "Sit you down, and I will make you tea."

She pushed Elizabeth into a chair, and set the kettle on the fire. The old woman looked at her, and shook her head.

"Owen would be terribly vexed, if he knew you had been so long at the house."

"Well, he does not know. So do not vex him."

"Ach, child, it is easy to talk——"

"Grandy honey," Sheila perched on the table beside her. "Don't worry yourself. I am all right. I only cooked the man's food and served it to him, as Owen bid me."

"I do not like it. I do not like it at all."

"But where's the harm?"

"You never know, with these strangers. They come from across the sea, bringing their wickedness with them."

"Ah, Grandy! Mr. Heron is a decent poor man. He is no way wicked at all."

"Then why is his wife not with him? Tell me that."

Sheila sat still.

"Has he a wife?"

"He has, more shame to him. Why is she not here?"

"Maybe she did not want to come."

"More shame to her, then!"

"Oh, Grandy." Sheila put an arm round the old woman's neck, and rubbed her cheek against the straight, white hair. "You are the hard one! Confess to me now, you know nothing about Mr. Heron or his wife. You are only making it up."

"I have no wish to know anything about him. The less I know of him the better," Elizabeth declared energetically.

"Why, what harm has he done you?"

"No harm—yet. Mind you this, child," she said, raising her face, and gazing close into Sheila's. "The less you have to say to any stranger, the better for you."



Sheila slipped off the table, and began to make the tea. Her face, as her back was turned, was sulky and mutinous. Strangers indeed! There were two or three of them every summer, foolish men at the worst, like Dr. Masterman, with no sort of harm in them at all. One of them got drunk once, but sure, what harm was that? Yet Elizabeth and Owen and John went on at her all the time, as if the men were snakes or had a disease on them. That was a narrow-minded way to be going on. There was no sense in it.

Sheila said all those things to herself on the top of her mind, but all the time she knew she was interested in this particular stranger, and that no one was going to take that interest from her.

It was this knowledge that got rid of her resentment. She began to hum to herself as she poured out the tea and set it before Elizabeth. Waiting until her aunt had taken a few sips, she folded her legs under her and sat down abruptly by the side of the chair.

"Dear Grandy. I didn't mean to vex you."

The old woman sighed, and stroked Sheila's hair.

"You are like your mother. Too like her, you are."

Sheila raised her face gently.

"I would wish to be like her."

The old woman drew in her breath with a hiss.

"Don't say that."

"And why would I not say it?" Sheila sprang up. "Why would I not say it?"

"There is a great deal you do not understand, child."

"I am not a child. I am eighteen years old." She stood, her legs straddled apart, looking down at Elizabeth. "Why should I not be like my mother? I *am* like her, to look at. Mr. Heron said so."

The effect on the old woman was electric. She spilled her tea, and was seized with a fit of coughing. Uttering exclamations of dismay, Sheila took the cup from her, and patted her on the back.

"I forbid you to go near that house again," Elizabeth gasped, as soon as she could speak.

"For goodness sake, Grandy! He was only comparing me with the picture. Sure, anyone might do that."

"You should not have put the picture there," stormed the old woman. "What possessed you? Why did you not leave it with the others?"

Sheila raised her chin.

"I love my mother. I am proud of her. I like to have her picture there for people to see. Anyway"; she sat down again. "Why are you so afraid of poor Mr. Heron? He is no way wicked, no way wicked at all. He is ill, and all bewildered in himself. He is coming here to see you soon, too," she added mischievously.

"What?"

"Why, Grandy, of course he is. He could not be living next door, and *not* come to see us, could he? The man is a neighbour."

"He should have stayed away," cried the old woman. "That meddling doctor should never have brought him."

"He brought him because he thought we should do him good."

"Tsee! You cannot do good to his like."

"Now, now, Grandy." She put an arm round the old woman's shoulders. "You know nothing about him. You're only——"

She broke off. Hobnailed boots sounded outside. The old woman moved as if galvanised.

"Owen! Quick."

In an instant, Sheila was sweeping as if her life hung upon it, and the old woman rose to put away her cup. By the time Owen thrust in his head, the two were at opposite ends of the kitchen.

Owen Brosnan was a man of fine appearance, marred only by the beginnings of a stoop. His likeness to Elizabeth was immediate; he had the same forehead, the same deep-set blue eyes, the same bold, bony nose. His beard and moustache were a yellowish white, and, though from his clothes it appeared that he had shrunk a little, he was still powerful in build.

He gave each of the women a brief, unblinking stare, and took a few steps into the room, his left foot dragging on the stone floor. His manner was that of a man wishing to ask a question, yet unwilling to show his hand. His moustache moved, as if he were about to speak but thought better of it. Instead, he waited, his presence loud in the room, till its sheer insistence should goad one of the women into speech. Owen often did this, though more from nature than design. He was not given to speculating as to the results of his actions upon others. His own feelings were enough for him.

Sheila, with her titbit of news, felt armed against him. Though in a sense she feared him, it was less because of himself than because of the disturbance he could cause. Years of seeing her aunt defer to him and contrive to avoid his anger, years of watching John's sullen deference, had made her accept as a fact that Owen must not be angered. But, as she had discovered in the last few years, on her own account she hardly feared him at all. He could beat her, and a beating was bad: but he could not *really* do anything to her. She had been afraid of him as a child, but she had learned to harden herself against him, and yield him

nothing. And, today, she felt less afraid of him than ever before. Silly old man—standing there glaring at them, not knowing what to say.

Turning, she crossed right in front of him, almost brushing against him, and set up a furious sweeping close to his feet. See will he move! She worked away, but, for all her new-won hardihood, dared not look up. She felt his glance screwing into her shoulders. The great boots stood like rocks. Then, at last—triumph!—they moved.

Elizabeth was going to speak. The air quivered about her. Imperiously, Sheila willed her to keep silent, sent out a sharp spurt of furious command. Elizabeth hesitated, broke between the two stresses, and dropped some clattering things in the sink. Owen caught his breath, and turned to glare at her. He swallowed audibly, and crossed over to the fire.

He was going to say something. Sheila heard it coming, like a grandfather clock preparing to strike. The instant before his lips opened, she looked up.

“Mr. Heron is coming soon, to pay his respects.”

Taken out of his stride, Owen stared at her, his mouth half open. There was a pause, while he transferred his thought from what he had been about to say, and adjusted it to the new thing.

Having grasped it, he frowned.

“He was in no hurry to pay them yesterday.”

Sheila’s voice took him up, light and false.

“He was feeling terribly sick, with the swaying of the car after his journey. He was afraid he would spew in front of you all. So he ran straight in.”

So far had she come from herself that she was hardly surprised at the glib speed with which the unforeseen words came out.

"Dr. Masterman said he had been sick."

Elizabeth spoke without turning round.

"He is in great concern about it," Sheila went on. "He said to me, 'When will it be convenient for me to call and pay my respects?' I said, whenever he pleased, and I would tell you. 'No, no,' he said, 'that is not at all what I want. I do not want them to stay in on purpose from their work. Tell me when they will naturally be in,' he said, 'so that I will not be a trouble to them.'"

Owen's face relaxed to a dour approval. These sentiments were correct.

"H'm," he said. "And when did you ask him to come?"

"I told him between four and five."

Owen considered this, but could find no objection. With a catch of the breath at her own audacity, Sheila pressed him further.

"Were you wanting anything?"

He bristled at her.

"Thank you; no."

The tone was dangerous. Elizabeth's elbows fluttered beseechingly. Screwing up her lip to hide a smile of victory, Sheila turned her back and went on brushing.

Owen stood for a few seconds more, cleared his throat, spat into the ashes, and walked out. There was a silence. Then, looking up, Sheila saw Elizabeth's eyes fixed on her in reproachful awe.

"What has come over you, girl! You might have had him terribly vexed."

"Ah, not him! Sure, he's helpless, if you give him no excuse."

"He's not helpless once he's angered. You know that," said the elder woman grimly.

Sheila stuck out her lip, and shrugged her shoulders. Suddenly she stood upright, and gazed in front of her.

"I only lose when *I* get angered," she said in a low voice.

"The thing is not to care. Then he can't touch you."

"What are you saying, child?" Elizabeth was frightened.

Sheila jerked loose from her discovery. "Nothing, Grandy. Come—let me help you with that."

## IX

AT A FEW minutes past four, David rose from the chair where he had sat resolutely reading, and went out into the yard. The film had passed from the sky, and the sun was growing brighter every moment. He looked up towards the farm, and saw a man's figure in the further field.

It was sheltered in behind the wall. The wind had dropped, though there was still enough to stretch and flap the washing behind the farm.

"I'll pull a chair out here," he said to himself aloud, "and sit in the sun, till they're ready."

He brought out a plain wicker chair from the kitchen, set it in the angle of the wall, and sat down, talking to himself. The sun beamed kindly on his eyelids. How good the air smelt, after the dead smell of the living room. The windows had been open all the morning, but still there was that indescribable smell of tobacco, and old, old dust, the stale discouraged air of a room that has never been properly cleaned and never will be.

The heady air delighted David's nostrils and blew into his lungs. He experienced an onrush of pleasure, bringing almost tearful gratitude and relief. The dark memory from his boyhood, so vividly detached from the past and hung round his neck like a huge identity disc, had violently disconcerted him. Just as there appeared the first, faint promise of escape from the circle of illness and unhappiness, unhappiness and illness, the past had struck with horrid

power. Even if you break loose from recent years, it told him, there is always this.

Now, as he raised his head, and inflated his lungs to the full, it shrank to a dream, shrivelled, and was blown away.

He opened his eyes. The man was coming down from the field. Weren't there two of them? Maybe the other was in already. Give him a minute, then go. Go soon, before the good mood leaves you.

He got up unsteadily, and went to the front of the cottage. His legs were stiff. That was the climbing. That always happens, he told himself soberly, when you go away from a level place to where there are hills.

Deliberately he occupied his mind with trifles, until he was at the farm door. Have they no dog? Funny. Perhaps they don't need one. Yet there are sheep. I never heard of a farm without a dog.

Oh Lord. Will Sheila be there? I can't face them in front of her. I shall feel a fool. But, my good man . . . Why on earth?

He raised his hand, and knocked loudly on the door. There was a pause, a female scuttling sound, and a deep voice called, "Come in."

David went in, and at first could distinguish hardly anything after the light outside. He blinked, and saw, at the far side of the dark room, a tall figure rise to greet him.

"Come in, Mr. Heron. Come in, and welcome."

David found time to be surprised at the length of time Owen held his hand while shaking it.

"This is my sister."

Elizabeth rubbed her hand on her apron, and extended it as if David were an animal that might bite.

"This is my brother John."

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John nodded. His handshake was unfriendly.

"You have met Sheila before."

"Indeed I have." David hardly dared to look at her. He was terribly nervous now, and his voice sounded much too loud. Why had he come?

"Sit you down, Mr. Heron. Sit you down."

The formula was courteous, but there was no welcome in the tone.

David sat down. The chair-leg clattered on the stone floor.

"You must have thought me very queer, not to have spoken to you yesterday. But I was feeling very tired."

Owen inclined his head. "Sheila said you were sick at your stomach," he said.

David looked at Sheila in surprise. Her profile was averted. His quick wits seized on the situation.

"I did feel pretty queer, certainly."

She hardly moved, but every line showed relief. Little hussy, he thought. I'll teach her to make my excuses for me.

"You feel well, now, I hope."

"Oh yes, thanks. A good night's rest makes all the difference."

Owen bowed again. There was a silence. The others sat, making no effort to join in the talk. David spoke again.

"Dr. Masterman told me a lot about Kilree. He said there was no place that would put me right so soon."

You fool, he said to himself in dismay. What are you doing, cringing to these clods? Trying to propitiate them?

To his surprise, Elizabeth spoke.

"Dr. Masterman is very fond of the place."

David turned to her gratefully.

"Yes. He loves it. He insisted on bringing me here. Partly, I think, to give himself an excuse to come again."

"It was a pity he did not make a stay. It is a very long way to come for so short a time."

"He is very busy. He could not afford longer. It was very good of him to bring me."

There was another silence, during which David covertly examined John. A great deal younger than Owen, lean, long-headed, with a short scrubby beard and lank hair hanging streakily over his neck, and large serrated ears, he sat, leaning forward, his mouth a little open, like an animal, paying no attention to what was going on. His eyes were dull, but not fixed: they gazed loosely at nothing. He would be capable, David saw, of sitting there like that for an hour, for two hours, without embarrassment, even if there were only one other person in the room.

The silence continued. This time, David resolved not to break it. He began frankly to look around the room. It was bare, low-ceilinged, and like most of its kind, except that someone had sought to introduce to it touches of Victorian gentility, in the shape of a large, harmonium-like musical box, a battered tallboy with a red wool antimacassar over the top, and a nameless plant in a pot swathed with discoloured, crinkled paper.

The most striking feature of the room, however, was a kind of inglenook on the side of the fire farthest from the window. It was hard to see this properly, for he had his shoulder and back to it. The near side of it was covered with an oilskin and some sacks. No one was sitting in it. They sat about by the walls, like people in a dentist's waiting room.

Owen stirred his feet.

"Sheila," he said. "Wet the tea."

As if a spring in her had been released, Sheila was out of her chair and through the door.

"I hope she is attending to you properly, Mr. Heron."

"Indeed, yes. It is very good of you to spare her."

This remark was ill received. Owen's brow contracted: he made his slight bow.

"You must tell me if she neglects her duties."

"I am sure she won't," David said heartily, and glanced at Elizabeth, to see if she would approve. He guessed that she would be the one to defend Sheila from her uncles.

"She is apt to be lazy," Owen said. "She needs to be watched."

"I can only say I've seen no signs of it yet," David smiled.

Owen bowed again. It was an acknowledgment that committed him to nothing. David unwillingly admired it.

Muttering something about helping, Elizabeth shuffled out after Sheila. David looked at Owen.

"I went out for a walk this morning, across the headland. I met an old man down by the bridge, but I couldn't get much out of him."

"That would be Peadar. Peadar O'Reilly."

"Yes. He told me his name. Previous to that, I was chased by two dogs, from the second cottage after you leave here."

"Old Kate Donnelly's. They will do you no hurt. You have only to threaten them with a stone."

"So I found. I went on across the bridge, and came to an old ruin. It looked like a church. Was it?"

Owen's face closed over. At the same time, though there was not a move from him, David realised that John had suddenly become alert.

"There was a church there," the old man said at last.

"I was wondering what happened. It looks as if it had been stripped by locusts: picked clean as a whistle."

Owen's face set harder. David determined to press him.

"What happened? Was it in your time?"

At first it seemed as if he would not answer.

"It was destroyed a long while ago," he said.

David eyed him. Perversely, he wanted to worm out the story. It was so pleasant to have him at a disadvantage.

"Do you know the story?" he asked: but, before Owen could react, the door opened, and Sheila and Elizabeth came in with tea.

David rose, they began to bring up chairs to the table, and in the confusion the question lapsed. He was just about to renew it, when his glance was caught by the further, uncovered wing of the inglenook.

He gasped as if someone had struck him. It was a pew-end.

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X

FOUR WHOLE DAYS had passed, but David would have had to think hard to reckon them. On this coast, under this large sky, time ceased. He was a hundred years from London. His illness, Alison, Seton, the nursing home, the affairs of a few days since, were jumbled up together, débris of another life. It was still David who lived here, who ate and pottered and stripped in the sun, but a David cut off from the old darkness. He could not have said that he was happy: he had not reached that stage of convalescence, and the enormous energy of the Western climate heightened his perceptions and made him emotional, tilting the see-saw violently between gloom and sunlight. The weather here affected one's very blood. A storm blew up in one's own entrails as well as on the sea, a mist fogged one's mind but made one's hearing unnaturally alert, sunlight ran and glittered on the water and on the surface of one's brain at once.

His nights, too, were ages of experience. He dreamed incessantly, waking each morning with the sense of having travelled aeons from his own body and laboured under many skies.

But he was physically better. Of that there was no doubt.

The face that looked at him from the mirror was brown, more alert, and had lost its peaked, pinched look. He had bathed, daring the place to do its worst, had winced, yelped almost, at the icy sting of the water, and then

exulted to feel the old glow warm his limbs, to know the primal sanity of health given by natural things. Good, good, good, he told himself thankfully. Now I shall bathe every day.

Practically all the time he had been alone. Sheila he hardly saw. She brought him his meals, but seemed absent in manner, and hurried away the moment they were done. At first he attributed this to his *faux pas* about the church, but she showed not the least hostility, and did not seem aware that he had said or done anything he should not. She smiled, she was solicitous for his comfort, but, when he tried to detain her and talk, she replied briefly and slipped away. He was aggrieved; then, as his well-being increased, he became preoccupied with it, and glad to be alone.

He had been for several more walks, exploring, but had not gone far. To reach fresh country, one had to get out of the bay, which meant a long walk in either direction, or to climb the mountain. He felt equal to neither effort. Presently, he told himself, but not yet.

Then, seeing the sky gray and calm, he remembered his rods. He had bought the fishing: why not try it?

Quickly, before his resolution could fade, he got the rods out, made everything ready, and started for the river. With a grin at his own cowardice, he turned down to the shore, rather than meet the dogs, but avoided the place where the skull might be.

Reaching the river, he selected a likely spot, fifty yards above the sand, where the river made a pool before running over pebbles into the estuary. Eyeing sky and water, he chose a fly. It might not work here: flies were local things: but it should.

A tentative cast or two showed him that he had not

forgotten his skill. Fly-fishing always interested David, though he was no fanatic. He succeeded through an innate sense of harmony between bank, rod, arm, and river: an intuition of mastery, a feeling, never formulated into theory, for what could be done on a given day and under given conditions. He knew, idly and surely, the mind of the fish. He would make a cast, then sit on the bank while other men flogged the river. Later, rising abruptly, he would cast again, and soon strike his fish. Or he would cast patiently for an hour, knowing, without being able to explain it, that only thus would he draw fish from the river that day. It was his sole sporting prowess, and it earned him much embittered wonder, in places where fishermen gathered.

He cast, changed his fly, and cast again, getting the feel of the river. Its individuality was strong: an acquaintance worth making.

Suddenly, as he moved a few steps up the bank, he knew he was being watched. He spun round, and saw Sheila sitting on a little knoll, looking at him.

Compressing his lips, he retrieved line and fly, then turned to her. She looked at him with grave interest.

"You have caught nothing." It was a plain statement, not a taunt.

"Not yet."

"You will not."

He smiled, his lips growing thin. "That's where you're wrong. I shall catch plenty."

She shook her head.

He challenged her. "Do you know anything about fishing?"

"A little. Enough to know——"

"Enough to know that fishermen like to be alone?"

She tossed her head.

"Enough to know that they expect to eat, but do not want to come home."

She pointed to a parcel on the ground beside her. He felt she had taken an unfair advantage.

"Thank you very much," he said at last.

She laughed at him frankly.

"You did not say that very well."

David grinned. "I'll say it again. Thank you very much. Was that better?"

"A little."

"You know," he said. "You're wrong about my not catching any fish. Fishing's one of the few things I know about. If I were on Mars, I could tell you in a minute whether I'd catch fish or not."

"Where is Mars?"

"Well—if I were on the moon, then. Why"—he stared at her—"you're wearing my coat again."

"If a person is cold, isn't it natural to pick up what is near your hand? Wouldn't *you*?"

"If I lived here for long, I suppose I should."

She laughed again. "I am only teasing you. I brought it because it was the easiest way to carry it. For you. You will want it. It's going to rain. You say you know about fish. I know about rain."

David looked at the sky.

"I'll take your word for it."

He stood, holding his rod, feeling pleased but awkward. She put her head on one side, screwing up her eyes, looking up at him against the light.

"Was it a liberty, when I took your coat? Not now, the first time?"



"Well, in a way, I suppose you could call it that. But don't worry about it."

"I don't now. Because you took a liberty too."

"Did I? What was it?"

"You unhooked my picture, and left it down. Twice, you did that."

"Good Lord. But I didn't mean—that is, I was only looking at it!"

"I was afraid you didn't like it."

"I like it a lot. So much that I took it down to see it better. That reminds me." He sat down beside her. "I want to talk to you seriously about that picture. It isn't wise to leave it there. It's very valuable."

"It will be safe with you."

"I know it will," he said, trying not to acknowledge a glow of pleasure. "But it mightn't with other people."

"I would not leave it there for other people."

"You left it there for me—before you knew anything about me."

She raised her brows thoughtfully, and stuck out her lip. Perched there, with her knees up to her chin, she looked like a brown comely monkey.

"I had a feeling to put it there."

"Where do you keep it as a rule?"

"With the others."

"The others! You don't mean to say there are more?"

"Oh yes. I have a lot. Seven or eight."

"But—but . . . I don't think you quite realise. If they are genuine, they must be very valuable indeed."

"Of course they are genuine." She had flushed. "When my mother died, she left them for me, with some of her

dresses. Elizabeth gave me them. They are all in the trunk, under my bed."

David passed the back of his hand over his brow.

"Good heavens." He leaned forward. "Do you realise that, if you took them to a dealer's and sold them, you would be rich?"

"Do you think I would sell my mother's picture?"

Her chin was up. She faced him proudly.

"Are they all portraits of your mother?"

"All of them."

David whistled to himself. "I see."

A silence fell between them, in which the chatter of the river suddenly seemed to grow loud.

David turned to her again. "Would you show them to me one day?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. That is—all except one."

"Why? What is wrong with that one?"

She looked out to sea.

"I could not possibly show you that," she said.

"I know why," David said cruelly.

She flashed round on him. "You do not."

"Yes I do. It's a full length portrait, with nothing on."

She jumped to her feet.

"How do you—— Oh. You *are* wicked."

And, with a whisk and a twist, she was running from him towards Kilree.

"Here! Come back!"

She would not listen. He marvelled at her speed.

"HI!" he bellowed. "You've got my coat."

She stopped at that: hesitated: and threw the coat on the ground. He hurried towards her.

"Please!" he said, with outstretched hands. "Please.

I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean any harm, you know. It only meant that I did understand."

She stood, doubtfully, swinging one bare leg.

"Of course you can't show it to me. Not because there are no clothes, but because we both know who it is."

She looked at him then, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes. Contrition stabbed him. He realised what an enormity it must seem to her—the thing in itself, the fact of standing naked before a man; and how infinitely more terrible that it was her mother. How could he make her understand that to Seager it had been nothing, that it was a commonplace of the studios? It would be impossible. To associate himself with it, to say to her that it seemed an ordinary thing, would only make her think he was a satyr from a world of satyrs. Besides, it wasn't an ordinary thing. Even he could see that. Here, in Kilree, for a girl so brought up—

How *was* Sheila's mother brought up, anyhow? He knew nothing about her. He was assuming that she was a peasant like the rest. Might she have come from elsewhere? He had only Sheila's word that she was sister to Owen and John and Elizabeth.

He looked at her.

"I'm sorry I said that," he said. "I do not know why I did. I think it must have passed from your mind to mine."

She stepped back, her eyes widening in fear. He saw what he had done, but kept on.

"Haven't you ever noticed how sometimes, when one isn't thinking, an idea leaps into one's mind, just as another person speaks it? One can't do it on purpose. It just happens."

She considered this.

"You did not know?"

"Did not know what? What you were thinking?"

"No." The blood stained her face deeply. "About my mother. That she——"

He realised this new fear, and almost shouted with relief.

"Good heavens, no! Of course not."

"You are telling me the truth?"

"I give you my sacred word of honour I had never heard of your mother till I saw the portrait you hung up on the wall."

She looked closely at him, then relaxed and sighed.

"I ought never to have said anything to you about the picture."

"What—the one at the cottage?"

"No. The other one. Then you would never have guessed." Tears came into her eyes again.

"You must not think that," he assured her earnestly. "It does not make me think ill of your mother. That is what you are afraid of, is it not?"

She nodded. Her knuckles came up to her eyes, like a child's.

"Painters often get people to sit for them like that. Hundreds of them. No one thinks the worse of them. You must have seen pictures of women: reproductions of paintings. Why"—he recalled the Academy reproductions—"there is a book in the cottage, with lots of them in."

She stamped her foot on the grass.

"Stop talking about it! I tell you to stop."

But she did not leave him. He kept his mouth shut for a minute or more, submitting, while a corner of his mind rebelled, to the force of her personality.

"Thank you for the sandwiches," he said. "What have you put in them?"

It was treating her like a young child. The instant he had spoken, he was appalled by his own crudity: so that, when she jumped suddenly, he started back, thinking she might be going to strike him. But she ran past him to the place where she had dropped the parcel, and there subsided cross-legged with comic abruptness. By the time he came up, she was unwrapping the food with the intent care of a monkey.

"Will you like it, do you think?" she asked, looking up at him sideways.

"Show me what it is."

"I cut up what was left of the chicken, and put in a lettuce, and the soda bread, and the butter."

"And no salt."

Her face fell. She looked as if she would cry again. David laughed at her.

"Now *I'm* teasing *you*. I don't eat salt."

She laughed.

"You gave me a fright."

They smiled happily at each other.

"Can't you stay and have some with me? There's more than I can eat."

Her face fell again. She sprang to her feet.

"No. I must go back. My uncles."

And, before he could remonstrate, she was gone. He watched her slim active figure dwindle, hopping over stones, moving along the track. The dogs barked, she called to them imperiously, and they stopped.

Turning back to his fishing, David felt lonely and disgruntled. The usual sour reaction rose in his mind. Though all that was generous in him respected her

feeling, he told himself that she was only little peasant girl, and why should he, a grown man, heed her moods?

He knew this was because he felt guilty for having caused her pain, and so was trying to put himself in the right.

With a sneer of self contempt, he picked up his rod, and felt at once that his mood had gone sour, and he would catch nothing. Stubbornly, he made a dozen futile casts, then broke off, angry and out of countenance, his morning spoiled, and fought against the wish to blame it all on Sheila.

"David Heron," he said aloud, "You are a——"

That's it. Pose. Try to externalise it. You worm. You worm.

He put the rods away, picked up his macintosh, and took his food down towards the sea. Hardly had he selected a rock to sit on when the rain came on. He glared indignantly, at the sky. It was gray and serene. There were no clouds, no excuse for rain. It *couldn't* be raining. Yet, indisputably it was: and, as if to deride him, the first patter stiffened to a steady hiss.

David got up, and went back to the cottage. The thought of a wet afternoon, spent there in solitude, turned him sick. No hot lunch even, only sandwiches.

Slieve Mor hung before him, a huge soft shape, its outlines fuzzy and blurred. A gray mass, like smoke, was gathering at its peak. David came to a tricky passage of stone and grass, and had to look at his feet. When he raised his eyes again, the peak was gone, and the whole landscape seemed to settle weeping down.

He came near the cottage, and his eye was immediately caught by a large white object in the doorway. It was

a packing case. Whoever had brought it had dumped it there, and decided that his responsibility was ended. David stared at it, and then realised it was his gramophone.

Thank God! he could unpack it, and play to himself all the afternoon.

## XI

THE RAIN, AFTER its first fall, settled to a steady drizzle. It whispered and tingled round Donough Rourke's boat as he baited his lobster pots, making occasional bids for his attention by coming down more heavily again and bespangling the surface of the sea with myriads of tiny bursting bells.

Donough paid it no heed. His movements were grave, methodical, unhurried. His large frame was covered in two woollen jerseys and a pair of trousers of such thickness and texture that, when he bent, they bulged instead of creasing. An oilskin lay in the bows: Donough only put that on for real rain. His one concession to the present was to wear his oilskin hat, the tapes dangling loose. In this, and his jersey beaded with moisture, and his shiny rubber boots, he looked like an enormous seal.

When he arrived from the mainland, his first impulse had been to hurry straight along, see Sheila, and tell her how good a trip it had been. Sixteen pounds of good money: she would clap her hands and skip for joy. He gave a wide grin of pleasure at the picture. But, even though he had done so well, the pots were not out, and it was a right tide. Business came first. Besides, he could moor his boat at Ellen Ban, and walk back to the farm that way. It was far the best.

By the time he had rowed along, the stern of his boat grotesque with the great lumbering pots, and had baited and set them, it was, he judged, round about four o'clock.

His



He pulled in, moored his boat to a rock, saw at a glance just when he must return, and set off, his great boots slipping and slithering on the wet weed. His movements, like those of so many big men, were a strange mixture of clumsiness and grace.

His oilskin was still in the boat. By no conscious process, he knew that the rain would soon take off. It was diminishing as he plunged across the neck of the little promontory. By the time he came down to the bridge, his boots knocking cascades from the dripping bracken, it lifted as quickly and as unreasonably as it had begun.

Donough jumped from the little bank. The bridge creaked under him, and he noted, again unconsciously, the darker brown of the river. With the level stride of a man intent on covering a distance, but not in a hurry, he came along the track, his eyes fixed meditatively upon the ground a little way in front of him.

He did not look up till he saw old Kate. The bent, flapping creature looked odder than ever. She had drawn a large and filthy sack over her head to keep off the rain, and, failing to observe that the rain had stopped, was peering from under it like a rheumy old bat from the eaves.

Seeing Donough, she pointed at him, and wrinkled her skinny nose with glee.

"Heee!" she cackled. "Heee! Look at him! Heee!"

"Now then, Katie." His voice was deep and good-humoured. "What ails you?"

"Heee!" She hugged herself under the sack. "My fine man. Your nose is out of joint."

He looked at her, smiling vaguely.

"It's out of joint, so it is. Well out of joint." She thrust out a brown knobbly forefinger. "You're going

to see Sheila Brosnan at the farm, but you can't find her."

"What do you say?" He turned pale. "She is not sick, is she?"

"She is not, then. It's well she is, too well for the likes of you, Donough Rourke."

"Here, here." He came closer to her. "What is all this?"

"She is not at the farm. She is at the cottage, with the new fancy visiting man. All day she is there. That's where you will find her, Donough Rourke, and she'll not be pleased to see you."

He frowned, digesting this. Kate writhed in delight, and waited for a flood of questions. Instead, he strode on.

Sheila was feeding the chickens when she heard his long, cool whistle. He swung a leg over the low stone wall, and came up the field. She looked back to the farm, dropped the biscuit tin, and flew down towards him.

"Donough!"

He caught her in a bear's hug, squeezing her breath out, lifting her clean off the ground. She gave a squeal of mingled joy and discomfort.

"You're all wet," she gasped, as he set her down. "You've gone right through to my chest."

He stood back, a large red hand on each of her shoulders.

"What is this old Kate has been telling me?"

She looked up at him, wary and innocent.

"Sure, that one would say anything."

"She said," laboured Donough, "that I would not find you, that you were not here, but that you were all the day with a fancy visiting man at the cottage."

Her eyes opened wider.

"Is it Mr. Heron?"

"I do not know who it is. I am asking you about it."

"Dr. Masterman. You remember him?"

"Of course I remember him. Why—is Dr. Masterman in it?"

"Don't be hurrying so. How can I tell you, if you won't wait for me?"

"Well. I am waiting. Tell me."

He was looking at her with concern. There was something odd in her manner, something new.

"Dr. Masterman brought a friend of his, Mr. Heron. Mr. Heron has been very ill, and he is to stay here for a rest until he is quite well again. He has taken the cottage, and Owen said I was to cook for him and make up his bed."

His face cleared. Then, as he looked at Sheila, something of his uneasiness returned. Donough was not subtle; he took Sheila as he found her; but there was an indefinable difference about her today, a sort of secret pleasure, as if she were keeping something to herself and shutting him out.

"Kate said you were there all day."

A delicious sense of danger and daring rose in Sheila. Balancing fearfully on the edge of his wrath, she feigned concealment.

"Oh no. Not all day."

She dared not look up, but felt his face darken and his great body tremble.

"How long are you with him? Is there no one else in the house?"

Oh power, power to rouse a strong man's anger, to sway

his mood, to make him dangerous! A shiver of joy ran through her. Never in her life had she made anyone jealous. She knew she was wicked, and did not care.

"No one else. Who could there be?"

"How long are you there?" he shouted.

She looked up, eyes wide, and saw that he was sweating. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Sometimes a long time. Sometimes very short. He talks to me."

Donough breathed loudly. He looked past her to the cottage.

"He is a very nice man," she added, her head on one side.

Donough did not speak. The angle of his jaw stood out.

"I will go and pay this man a visit," he announced.

"What did you say was his name?"

"David. David Heron."

For a terrified second she was afraid she had gone too far, but Donough controlled himself. He lowered his head, like a bull about to charge, and walked past her towards the cottage.

She watched him go, half frightened, half exultant. There would be much to think over in her room that night. Sheila was finding out a lot of new things about herself. The idea of teasing Donough like this, the imp that had made her mention David's christian name before his surname: these were complete strangers.

When Donough was half way to the cottage, fear gripped her. Suppose he should attack David and kill him! It would be her fault. She would be a murderer.

She started forward, a hand to her mouth, and uttered

a faint cry. Then she called shrilly, and began to run after him.

He heard her, hesitated, and turned. She ran up to him, her mouth open, shaking her head.

"He did not, Donough. He did not."

His great brow rose in ridges.

"He did not what?"

"He did not do me any harm."

To her surprise, he smiled.

"I know that."

She was at a loss. "How do you know?"

"You said he was a nice man."

He smiled again, and went on, leaving her standing on one leg, relieved, yet disappointed.

David, his brow furrowed over a letter he was writing, heard the crunch of rubber boots on the path outside, followed by a thunderous knock on the door. He looked up, startled.

"Come in," he called.

There was a silence, then the knock was repeated even louder. With an exclamation of annoyance, David rose.

"Come in!"

The door was pushed open, and a large form filled it. A young man, David saw at once, still under thirty: tall, fair, fresh complexioned, with wide-apart blue eyes, a great strong chest, and muscles which even the gross woollen jersey did not conceal. Resenting the disturbance, and unwillingly taking stock of him, David found himself yielding. The man stood, silent but not awkward, vitality radiating from him. There was nothing aggressive in his gaze. It was frank and steady.

After what seemed a long time, he spoke.

"Good afternoon. My name is Donough Rourke."

Deeply impressed with the man's appearance, David was unprepared for the beauty of his voice. He pulled himself together, and, as so often when his personality felt a challenge, heard himself reply in a harsh tone that belied his thought.

"Mine is Heron. They'll have told you about me at the farm?"

If the newcomer felt the hostility of his tone, he did not show it. He said nothing, but looked slowly round the room. The open gramophone caught his attention, and his face lit.

"You like music."

It was a statement, not a question. The voice expressed such satisfaction that David felt the corners of his mouth twitch. Donough was approaching the gramophone with the curiosity of a child.

"I want one of those. We always had one aboard, but I have little time for music now." He looked at David gravely, almost anxiously. "I am on my own now. I have to work hard."

"You were a sailor?"

"Yes. Have you many tunes?"

His eagerness was touching. David joined him by the gramophone.

"Here, look. In those albums. Choose."

Donough gazed at the albums, awestruck. David put one in his hands. He held it helplessly.

"Choose you, Mr. Heron. There are so many."

Outdoor, thought David: and not too difficult. He put on the last movement of the Second Symphony of Sibelius.

Donough sat, his large hands on his knees, attentively

watching the spinning disc. He looked like a huge animal expecting the machine to perform some kind of trick. When the record ended, and David stepped forward to turn it over, he said ceremoniously:

"Have I your leave to take off my jersey? It is warm in here."

"But of course."

He pulled the top jersey over his head, with swift, clumsy movement, and looked up, his face pink with the friction, his hair on end. David re-started the record, and offered him a cigarette. He beamed, warming instantly to the gesture of friendliness. David struck a match for him. His hand shook, and Donough's hand at once caught and held it steady, till the cigarette was lit. Then he sat back, contentedly blowing out vast clouds of smoke. Even in repose, his vitality filled the room.

"Well." David removed the record. "How did you like that?"

"It was a good tune. It was like the sun coming out on a stormy sea. I like something sweeter best. I have a pipe that I play, but I have not brought it with me."

"Try this."

David put on an old tune from the Highlands. At its end, Donough nodded slowly.

"Yes. That is sweet, but it is sad too. Do you like only sad music?"

"No."

The tone was curt, and Donough let the subject pass. He looked about the room.

"You read many books," he observed.

"Yes. And you?"

"I never read at all. But I have seen a great deal. I

have been in many countries. I have seen enough to fill all those books."

"I can see no point in travelling when other people will do it for me. And write about it," he added, for Donough's brow wrinkled uncomprehendingly. "I prefer to use a writer's eyes. If they are good."

Donough gave him a quiet glance.

"You need to be strong to like travel," he said.

There was not a trace of malice in his tone, but David's body prickled all over. He was searching for a violent retort, when he found himself smiling. The man's remark had been made in perfect friendliness. Donough was one, he saw, to whom dispassionate statement could never seem offensive.

"When I am an old man," Donough went on, "I think I will read books. Till then, I would rather be doing."

"I understand your point of view. But you may be missing things."

"How would that be?"

"You might find that another man, doing the same things as you, saw them in a different way. If you read his book, you would have his pleasure to add to yours."

Donough considered.

"Yes. But his way might spoil mine, too."

"Oh," said David, laughing. "Don't think I'm trying to convert you. I don't mind what you do. What would you like? another record?"

"Do you not play yourself?"

"I used to play the piano." He surprised himself by admitting it. "And the organ, when I could. I gave it up a long time ago. I sometimes wish I hadn't: even though I



never played well enough to satisfy myself. It fills a need in one. Listening isn't enough."

Why on earth, he thought, am I talking to him like this? Donough nodded again.

"You are right. One must play oneself. It is a pity that you gave it up. Can you not play at all now?"

David shrugged, and seated himself at the piano. He hesitated, then began one of his old stock pieces. His mind was blank, but his hands remembered. For three minutes, perhaps, he played, hardly hearing the instrument's deficiencies in the forgotten sensation, which plunged him back into a previous way of life as into a bath. Donough and the room disappeared, then came back twice their size. Apprehension seized David. He feared he would break down, tried to think what came next, and in panic broke off with a crash of discord.

"The piano is hopeless," he said, getting up. "It can't have been tuned for years."

Donough looked hurt.

"I was enjoying it," he said. "You play well."

"I had forgotten what it felt like," said David, sitting down. He felt ashamed of himself. "Perhaps if I can get this thing tuned, I might start again."

"I hope you will: and that you will let me listen to you."

David looked at him, and smiled. On an impulse, he put out his hand. "You are very friendly to me," he said.

Donough smiled all across his face. He grasped David's hand, and wrung it hard.

"I am glad that we are to be friends, Mr. Heron."

He held the hand so long, after the local custom, that David became embarrassed.

"Now for a drink," he said, "to celebrate the occasion," and went to the cupboard. What on earth is the matter with you, cried his older self. You must be off your head. Behaving like a hysterical schoolgirl.

But, hot with a new excitement, he refused to listen.

## XII

WHILE THIS INTERVIEW was in progress, another was taking place at the farm. Sheila, having watched Donough disappear into the cottage, remembered her duties, retrieved the tin from the chickens, and returned, elated, to the kitchen.

So deep in her thoughts was she that, when she saw Elizabeth, her eyes darkened like those of an animal surprised in its secrets. The old woman started, and looked as if she had seen a ghost.

"Merciful powers!" she gasped, and dropped the colander from her hand.

"Why, Grandy! Whatever ails you?"

"Gracious, child." Elizabeth held her heart. "For the instant, I thought you were your mother."

She sat down, covered her face with her hands, and burst into loud weeping.

"Grandy!"

That Elizabeth should cry was like the mountain crumbling. Never in her life had Sheila seen such a thing. She kneeled by the chair, and put an arm round the heaving shoulders.

"Grandy, darling! You mustn't! What is it?"

Elizabeth shot out a brown, tear-wet hand, and clutched her by the wrist.

"It was like the dead past once again. She came in, with just that look—— Oh, Sheila child, I have been so afeard for you, these last days."

"For me, Grandy? But why?"

The old woman rubbed her eyes with the back of a free hand. She looked past Sheila, and her words came uncontrolled.

"She was so kind, so gentle and good, and yet she had a way with her that would make the men go through hell and work their fingers bare. No living man or woman could withstand her. Not one of them at all. She had a coaxing way with her, till you would never know the strong-willed one she was. She—she—granite would not break her. She could have had her pick of princes, and who would think she would take to him, a little fellow in knickerbockers that was hardly a man at all, and him old enough to be her father, and doing nothing all day but painting little bits of pictures and tearing half of them up again.

"There was no solid worth in him, Sheila." She shifted her grasp on the girl's arm. "No solid worth at all. I was telling her that, time and time again, but she was possessed, I tell you, it was a spell he put on her, she could never see him for the little handy-andy that he was. My poor Mary, my poor Mary! he had her so bound, she would not live without him. My curse on him!" Her fingers bored into Sheila's arm. "He was the devil come to Kilree. We are never the same since. And now here is this Heron, just such another, the same spirit in new flesh."

Sheila pulled her arm roughly away.

"You are not to say that. It is a lie."

The old woman turned on her, snarling.

"Who are you to speak? You never saw the man. I tell you, that Seager was a devil, a devil! May he boil in hell for ever."

"What you say is not sense." Sheila spoke from an icy peak of contempt. "It is lies both ways. If Seager was a

devil, my mother would have had nothing to do with him. Why should he not paint pictures? They are good to look at, and it was her face he painted, because he liked it. And Mr. Heron is not a devil either. He is kind, he talks to me as if I had sense, not the way you and Owen and John talk to me. He likes to look at my mother's picture, too. He said he was glad it was there."

Elizabeth rose, pointing, and Sheila stepped back from her leaping forefinger.

"I knew well he had been talking with you! You crazy fool! Can you not see it will be the same with you as with your mother?"

"But I want it to be the same with me."

"What!" screeched the old woman.

"Why should I not be his friend when he is kind to me? My own kindred are no use. Owen beats me and will not buy me clothes: and John would like to kill me. Yes, he would. I see him squinting at me, and his eyes are yellow with hate. *You* are kind, but you cannot help me."

Elizabeth's rage left her. She had forgotten: the child did not know what she was saying. Then the unconscious cruelty of the last words reached her, and she sighed. Age was coming on her fast, or she would not have been betrayed by her surprise into this outburst.

She looked at Sheila, and wanted to take her in her arms. Were the child provided for safely, then death could come tomorrow, for all Elizabeth cared.

"What about Donough?" she said severely. "Is he not a friend?"

Sheila shrugged and stuck out her lip.

"Owen would keep me away from him. He does not like Donough to look after me."

"Small difference Owen's liking makes to you," Elizabeth retorted. She had regained hold on her spirit. "Listen here. If you and Donough make a match of it, I will stand your friend. Even though I am no use."

Sheila had not yet come to the point where she could apologise.

"Aye, and I can aid you with more than words, my girl. I have money put by that will buy you your wedding dress."

"I will wear one of my mother's dresses."

Elizabeth cried out, and shook her fist.

"Indeed you will not. You will wear none of the gaudy rags, bought with evil money. If I had my own way," she thrust her face into Sheila's, following her as the girl proudly backed away, "I would have burned the heathenish things, aye, and the daubs of pictures with them; but I gave word to your mother on her deathbed. 'Keep them for her,' she said. 'Keep them for her, and guard the pictures well. They are her fortune.' She was weak in the head, poor thing, and all but gone, but I gave her my word. When she lay dead, I took them in my hands, and longed to put them on the fire, but I had given my word. Aye, you may sneer; but let me tell you this. There is a curse on those clothes. They killed your mother."

Sheila's eyes dilated.

"What do you mean, they killed her?"

"There was no substance in them, the trash the man brought from foreign parts. She caught cold out one night, wearing the flimsy things, and the cold stayed in her chest and weakened her when you were born."

There was a pause. Sheila looked at the floor. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking.

"Did he never come back?" she asked abruptly.

"Not a sight of him did any of us see again, and glad we were of it."

"Did he leave no provision?"

"There was a bit of a letter," the old woman admitted, "handing over the cottage to her."

"Perhaps he could not come back."

"Perhaps he could not, with the petticoats hanging so tight to him."

The venom in her voice did not so much anger Sheila as bore her. All this fuss over a man who had been gone twenty years. Her mind leaped across to the cottage, when Elizabeth shot in with uncanny exactness upon her thought.

"I hope you said nothing to that man about the other pictures?"

Sheila looked at her haughtily.

"Say no word to him," the old woman warned her, "or you will lose them."

The girl's eyes blazed. She was about to betray herself, but Elizabeth in her eagerness did not notice.

"There were men looking for pictures here after that fellow died. They searched everywhere. They took up the boards of the floor, but they found nothing. Owen would have burned the pictures then, only I stopped him."

Sheila could understand that. It was exactly the reaction she would expect of him.

"Let you be warned, now," Elizabeth concluded, thinking she had made an impression. "Do not tell him, or he will bring men down upon you, and you will be robbed. If he does not rob you himself."

Sheila raised her head, and looked at her aunt with an impersonal hostility. It was no good being angry with these people. They lived in another world. She must watch them, and see that they did not interfere.

She went to the sink, and began to wash up. There was little to do, and, as soon as it was done, she went out. It was not raining, but the sky was low and uncertain: the mainland was much too clear, and there was a woolly cap over the mountain. The air smelled good.

She stood, sniffing appreciatively, her emotion gone. She was just beginning to think that she felt hungry, when Donough emerged from the cottage. He did not wave, but came across to her.

She waited for him. Her mood was undecided as the sky.

As he came near, he smiled.

"Mr. Heron is a friendly man," he said. "He will not hurt you at all."



### XIII

"MR. HERON!"

David sat up with a jerk. Sea and sand and the distant mountains swam colourless before his eyes. He had been lying on his back, the sun on his eyelids, half asleep. He blinked around crossly, and could see no one.

"Mr. Heron!"

It was Donough's voice. David kneeled up, and suddenly saw the man, below him, on a rock above the sand. In his hand he carried a coil of rope and a knife: he wore rubber fishing-boots, and was smiling up good-naturedly, his face rich in the sun.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you. But there is a whale washed up above the point. I am going to it to cut bait for lobsters. I thought you might like to come."

Surprised and gratified by the display of goodwill, David scrambled to his feet.

"I should like to very much," he said, and half ran, half slid down the sandy slope until he stood beside Donough. Then for a moment the two men smiled awkwardly at one another, embarrassed but friendly, unprepared to be so close together.

Donough recovered first.

"It is this way," he said, and set off across the sand. The evening sunlight lay thick upon it. There was a haze rising from the horizon, and, though the sun was still well above its indeterminate fringe, a faint emanation had softened the rays and turned the light to gold. The

sea was level, and glimmered widely away to left and right.

Donough went with long casual strides, forcing David to exert himself in order to keep up.

Just below old Kate's cottage, he cut up towards the track. Kate's dogs, seeing the two figures, set up their shrill outcry and came flying down the field, each in relief against its shadow.

Donough waited until they were within a hundred yards of him, then called out a cheerful welcome to them in Irish. At once their behaviour changed. They came wriggling up, whining and fawning, in an ecstasy of joyful self-abasement. David was included in their greeting: they might never have seen him before.

Donough spoke to them, in deep, goodhumoured tones, and cuffed at them with his great hand. They were beside themselves. After a few yards, he said something sharply, and at once they fell away, and stood looking disconsolately after the pair.

"The poor animals," Donough said. "They are bored to death up there, with nothing to do."

"They kick up enough fuss whenever they see me."

"Anything, sure, for a little excitement."

They crossed the bridge, Donough's tread sounding muffled and hollow, and climbed the neck of the promontory. As they climbed, their shadows, lengthened by the sun, jumped erratically over the bracken-covered slope beside them.

"My boat is below," Donough said. "I have moored it at the rocks."

"But didn't you say the whale was in this bay?"

"Yes. But we will put the whale-meat in the boat and row straight off to the lobster-grounds."

Two minutes' scramble brought them to the boat, and they were soon rowing across the stillness of the little bay.

The land behind it, David saw, was higher than he had suspected. Directly above the sand towered the rocks, making in one place almost a miniature cliff. He turned, puzzled, and saw that from the promontory, the farthest place he had explored, this part of the bay was hidden.

The whale was soon visible: rather disappointing, as seen from a distance. As they came nearer, however, David saw that it was large enough. The moment they got there, he began to examine it, walking along its length with a puzzled frown. It lay on its side, a vague purplish brown in the rich light, its mouth half open, its little eye set in an expression of mild bewilderment.

"I am going to take some steaks from the back," Donough began, and broke off in surprise to see David squatting down and thrusting his hand against the huge swollen side. His curiosity roused, he came round.

"What are you looking at?" he enquired.

David stood up. "It's a female," he said, "and she is pregnant. What's more, I think it's the pregnancy that has killed her."

"They are often hit by the propeller of a boat," Donough suggested.

"Perhaps. Let's look." He walked round. "No sign of injury anywhere. Can't turn her over, of course, but I don't think there's anything. No blood."

Donough affected polite interest. Then he set about his task. Making a cut along the spine, he began to saw at right angles from it, marking out steaks nine inches or a foot in thickness. David watched him, then went round again to the creature's abdomen.

"Have you a second knife?" he asked.

Donough stopped. Patiently, deliberately, without complaint, he washed his hands in a small pool beside the whale, fished in his pocket, produced another knife, and handed it over.

"Don't you trouble," he said. "I can cut enough."

"It's not that I'm thinking about," David replied: and as he spoke, as he found the knife in his hand and realised what he intended to do, all the old shrinking came back upon him. He felt cold and sick.

"What are you going to do?"

The knife was in his hand, he had asked for it, he could not stop now without making a complete fool of himself. Fatalistically accepting the compulsion, as so often in the past, he went down on one knee.

"I want to see why she died," he said through resolute teeth.

Donough smiled indulgently. "How will you know?"

"I was a doctor once."

"Do you tell me that!" Donough's tone altered completely. He stood back and gazed down on David with a new respect.

There was no backing out now. David took off his coat, and rolled up his sleeves. He knew, once again, the awful sensation of falling into a cold pit, one David pitilessly pushing his struggling, panic-stricken brother.

His hand shook so that he could hardly hold the knife. The blade slipped on the tough, blubbery hide. He could not get it in.

"Is it not sharp enough? Let me make the cut. Then it will be easier."

David stood up thankfully. He was sweating all over.

"Thanks. Here, look." He stooped. "In this direction."

Donough plunged the blade in, and ripped the flesh.

The incision brought a sound like a huge sigh, as the liberated gas rushed out. He leaned back, and grinned up at David. "Thanks," said David again. He spoke coldly: he dared not show his gratitude. "I can manage now."

It took an effort, even now. You fool, he thought. Why bring all this on again? Why can't you let well alone? You hinder your own recovery.

Donough resumed his cutting of steaks, and for a couple of minutes there was no sound but the wet slither of the flesh and the irregular breathing of the operators. Then David looked up.

"It's here, all right."

He washed his hands, pulled his sleeve right up to the armpit, lay on his stomach and reached the full length of his bare arm into the hole which he had made. He groped for a few seconds, then strained away, and dragged out, tail first, a baby whale, slim, graceful, about five feet long.

Donough uttered a soft exclamation of surprise. He came round and looked down at it.

"Poor little thing. How thin it is."

It was perfectly formed, lying limp and pale, with flecked silver hide and little toothless mouth.

"Could it have lived, Mr. Heron?"

"I don't know." David went down on his knees again. "I want to find out what was wrong with the mother."

Donough watched him for a moment, then went on cutting. There was another silence. David got up.

"Did you find it, Mr. Heron?"

"Can't be sure. It was a kind of convulsion, I think." He looked ruefully at his arm. "A wash seems indicated. Good lord, what——?"

A strangled bellow sounded from behind, making him jump. Turning, he beheld an apparition so extraordinary that for the moment he thought it must be a phantom.

A tall figure, dressed in a shapeless garment like a monk's, with the hood thrown back, was striding towards them across the sand. The face was a hideous mask, twisted and inhuman. The sunset light poured full upon it, staining it a livid orange: and, as it came nearer, David caught his breath in a hiss of dismay. For half the face was not there. One eye, one ear had gone, and a frightful serrated scar blotted out the left hand side, taking the hair with it. The other side was convulsed with rage, and one black eye gleamed and leaped with the movements of the crooked mouth.

The figure's right hand was raised threateningly, and a voice of astonishing power boomed about them like a bell.

"*Abi,*" it thundered. "*Abi stuprata gens! Vadite scelerati. Num manus foedissimas sanguine matris imbruitis?*"

David stared, holding his dripping arm away from his side. He looked enquiringly at his companion, then back at the wild, gesticulating figure.

Donough edged close to him, and spoke in a whisper.

"Don't mind him, don't mind him at all. I will take the steaks to the boat. Do you bring the little whale."

He stooped, picked up a load, and disappeared from David's vision. The figure uttered a terrifying bellow and came a step nearer. David's nerves, tense after his operation on the whale, tightened unbearably in response. Fear left him: he became angry. As the figure raised its arm again, he raised his own.

"*Non tuus piscis,*" he shouted back. "*Tace! Ne clamaveris!*"

The dog-Latin seemed to disconcert the visitor. He stood, glaring furiously at David, who, secure in his anger,

knelt down and proceeded to wash his arm in the pool. While he was doing so, he heard Donough approach from behind and seize another load.

"I have it now, Mr. Heron. Do you bring the little one as soon as you're ready."

"Right."

The figure was bellowing unintelligibly now. David stood up, pulled down his shirt-sleeve over his wet arm, and put on his coat. Rage flickered through him like lightning. His control snapped.

"Oh, shut up, blast you!" he yelled, unable to endure the noise: then he seized the baby whale by the tail and began to drag it over the sand towards the boat.

The stranger uttered a thick roar, and came stumbling after him. Then, seeing that he could not prevent what was happening, he stood still, uplifted a hand, and began intoning what sounded like an ecclesiastical curse.

Donough was by the boat, dropping the steaks on the thwart, stumbling and fumbling at the oars.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" he muttered. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

David, whom the whole scene had wrought to a pitch of hysterical irritation, saw suddenly, with disdain, that Donough was afraid of being cursed. At once he felt a perverse impulse to delay; but Donough, reaching out a huge hand, grabbed the little whale from him, slung it aboard as easily as if it had been a mackerel, and then, to his speechless indignation, lifted him bodily off his feet and deposited him in the stern. A push, three splashing steps, and with a deft leap he had got one knee on the stern thwart and clambered in past David. Reaching his thwart, he seized the oars and, with quick powerful strokes, sent the boat skimming across the smooth surface.

David sat, shaking, trying to regain control. Nosing swiftly about in self-defence, his mind fastened on Donough's alarm. He himself had been shocked, over-stimulated. He could never bear to be shouted at, and this mad scene, this uncouth blaze of sheer melodrama, outraged all his senses: but he was not afraid, and the reaction of superstitious terror was one he could disdain, and so recover his self-respect.

By a queer illusion, as the boat increased its distance, the figure of the monk seemed to grow in size, until, standing there like a pillar, the rich sunlight full on his habiliments of rusty red, he looked eight or nine feet high. With the flaccid bulk of the whale behind him, the orange-tinted sand, and the steep rocks in the background, the whole picture was so bizarre that David hardly believed he saw it.

His gaze fell from the shore to the eddies behind the boat and the deep boiling pits left by the oars. He turned, and saw that Donough, for all his exertion, was breathing easily again.

Donough smiled.

"I am best pleased to be away," he said, "and not to be vexing him."

"Who is he?" David asked. "Where does he come from?"

"He lives in a cave around the corner."

"What, all the year round? By himself?"

"Aye."

David's past training rose up in protest.

"It should never be allowed," he said hotly. "Something should be done about it. Why does he live there?"

Donough's face had become blank. "It is hard to say that," he replied.



His expression was not easy to read, but David understood that he was anxious to dismiss the subject. Once again the perverse desire rose up in him to embarrass his host. It was reinforced by a real sense of outrage.

"Well," he said, "whatever the reason, he ought to be cleared out, and as soon as possible. He needs medical attention. Dr. Masterman will be here again soon. I will get him to come and see the man, to have him certified and removed."

As he had expected, Donough rose to this.

"Sure, why would you do that, Mr. Heron? The poor man does no harm."

"He wanted to do me harm," David retorted. "He is dangerous, if ever a man was."

"Well, then, he is not," said Donough. "He has never been known to hurt a person all the years——"

He broke off, seeing that he had said too much.

"All the years he has been there." David completed it for him. "You had better tell me about it."

Donough's manner took on a real dignity.

"We are accustomed to him, Mr. Heron. We do not wish any person to make a mock of him."

"My good man," said David, exasperated. "All I want to do is to see that he has proper attention, both for his own sake and for other people's. The very fact that you are concealing his story suggests that you know quite well that he ought to be under restraint, and would be, if anyone responsible knew the truth."

Donough was silent for a few seconds.

"If you want me to keep quiet about it," David persisted, "your best chance is to tell me all you know."

"It's this way," Donough said at last. "If a man had a

misfortune, or made some sort of a mistake, you would not want to be bringing it up against him."

"As a general rule, that's perfectly true. But in a case like this it's different. To hide the facts might easily be a mistaken kindness."

"You would not go spreading it abroad, or putting it into one of your books?"

"Of course not."

Donough still hesitated. He cleared his throat, and spat over the side. David waited, looking ahead towards the setting sun. A sickly, sweetish smell, which had grown stronger as they proceeded, he at last identified with the mass of whale meat under Donough's thwart. He nodded towards it.

"Beginning to sing a bit, isn't it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

David pointed. "Don't you notice it?"

"The meat? Ah, no. Sure, it's fresh yet."

"Fresh, is it? I shouldn't like to be on that beach in a few day's time."

"That is so. It will be a heavy smell." Donough grinned. "All the better for the lobsters. They like their meat strong. This is fresh, but, sure, I took it while there was the chance."

"Why? Did you expect him to come out and mount guard?"

"It was not of him I was thinking. But other fishermen down the coast will hear of the whale and will come for their share."

Silence fell again. David broke it.

"Well," he said, in a friendly tone, "tell me about our friend."

Donough sighed.

"It was a long time ago now," he said. "There was a farmer in it. He lived down in the village on the far side of the big head, and he had three sons. Two of the sons were contented where they were, but the eldest son could not content himself, and he went away to England.

"Away in England, he learned new ways, and became a hard-swearing, free-thinking man. He did not prosper, for all his new ways. Then, one day, his father fell sick, and they sent word for him to come back. He was not sorry to come, for it was a hard living he made, and he thought that now maybe the farm would be his own. So he made the journey back, and, when he got back, it was too late, and his father was just after dying.

"He was not long in the house before the priest came in. 'Give me five pounds now,' said the priest, 'to say a mass for your father's soul.' But the son had lost his religion, and he gave the priest a rough answer. 'I will give you no five pounds,' he said, 'and you can go back where you came from.'

"A few hours later, the priest came to the house again. 'Give me five pounds,' he said, 'to say a mass for your father's soul.' 'I will give you no five pounds,' says the son, 'nor five shillings. So you can spare your trouble.'

"The priest went away, and he did not come back till the next day, when they were making ready for the wake. 'It is the last chance I am giving you,' said the priest. 'Pay me the five pounds now, or the devil will come this night and take your father away.' 'Let the devil come,' said the son, 'and let him take away my father, and yourself with him. You will get no five pounds from me, and I do not want to see your ugly face in the door again.'

"The priest gave a curse then, and went away. That

same night"—Donough's voice became solemn and impressive: "that same night, when they were in the middle of the wake, all of a sudden they heard a clanking of chains. They were frozen with fright, and sat each one just where they were, not daring to stir. The clanking came nearer, up to the very door, and then, as they were watching, with the eyes staring from their heads, they saw the door open slowly, and around it came the head and horns of a bull.

"They let a great cry of fear, and leaped up, and ran for their lives. All except the eldest son. He ran too, but he ran into the next room, and came back with a gun. When he came back, he saw the bull standing up there on its back legs, and pulling at his father's body, to drag it out of the coffin and out of the door. He up with his gun then and let fly the two barrels. The bull dropped limp as a bag: and when he went over, and pulled away the bull's head and the hide, there lay the priest in his blood, and the half of his face was shot away."

There was a silence. Donough leaned over the side, and spat again.

"It was a bad scandal in the place," he went on, shaking his head, "and that is why, you see, we do not like to speak of it."

David cleared his throat.

"I can perfectly well understand that," he said, "and I can understand his wishing to be an exile. The only thing that worries me is whether he may not be doing himself harm. I am sure you all look after him well: but it can't be good for a man in delicate health to live rough like that in a cave."

"He is not in delicate health," Donough replied. "He is a very strong man. When we have sickness in the Island,

he is always well. Indeed, sometimes it is he who looks after us."

"Even so, he is not a well man. He has obvious symptoms——" He broke off, and was silent. Donough rowed on, then turned and looked over his shoulder.

"Wait you now. We are near the first of the pots."

They bore to the left, making for a small cork float. With a few dexterous strokes, Donough ran the nose of the boat within a foot of it, leaned out, and caught the float in his huge hand. He shipped the oars, and began hauling at the rope. The boat tilted, and with a jerk of his head he motioned David to trim it.

Half a minute later, the ungainly structure came swirling and bubbling up from the depths. Heaved over the side, it was transformed by the setting sun into a misshapen casket of splendour: the wire netting gleamed, the wooden floor was splashed with gold. It contained no lobsters, but a couple of small and indignant crabs. The pieces of skate with which it was baited added their stench to that of the whale, making the back of David's nose contract. Tiny active sea-lice, transformed by the light into leaping gems, flipped and splattered all over bait and basket.

Inside ten minutes, four pots had been pulled up and baited, and the boat was much more habitable. The baby whale, which lay coiled up underneath David, had no smell at all.

"I am going to put down the little one for ground-bait in a special place I know," Donough said. "I will leave him there for a week or more, and then come back."

"Will there be anything left of him in a week?"

"There will so. I told you, lobsters like their meat strong."

He took the oars and rowed along, heading for a little lagoon in one of the small rocky islands that dotted the

bay. The scene in front of them was now of an unimaginable splendour. The west was drowned in fire, and the sea, except for the broad path of the sun, was of an unearthly green, and seemed to tilt up towards the horizon, aloof from sky and land.

On the rocks of the lagoon gulls were standing in tiers, waiting for the night. They did not rise as the boat passed, but set up a resentful, sleepy murmuring. Donough leaned over the side, peering down into the still depths for the rocks which he was seeking. David, following his example, saw, inclining, green and strange, patches of clear sand, and weed like flowers, aspiring in a dream.

Donough uttered a grunt of satisfaction, pulled once with his left hand, and let the boat stop. He shipped the oars and sat up.

"Now," he said, and reached for the little whale. Pulling out his huge knife, he cut a slit near its neck and another near its tail, and lashed a cord tightly to each, allowing plenty of play. Then he cut the cord in the middle, took both ends in his hand, and dropped the little whale over the side, so as to give himself more room while he knotted both ends of the cord to a large stone.

David leaned over and looked at the little whale. It sank two or three feet, and immediately its drab colour gave place to a soft deep blue. In the uncertain light he could hardly believe that it was not alive. Given thus to the element it had never known, its slim, graceful body responded to the pull of the tide. The tail waved slowly, naturally, till David could have sworn that it was swimming there beside the bulk of the boat, as it should have swum by its mother's side. For a minute, perhaps, the shadow companionship lasted; its unreality, its poignance, coupled with the unearthly beauty of the evening, struck deep into

David. The strain of what had happened made him emotional, and his eyes misted, so that when the stone was lowered overboard and dragged the body down to the dimness of the sandy floor, he saw only a vague blur disappear into the forest of leaning weeds.

## XIV

THE SURFACE OF the sea was still smooth, but a swell had risen in the night, the outer ripple of some disturbance far out in the Atlantic. David noticed it first in the continuous noise that came from the rocks at the end of the promontory, and saw with surprise that each was ringed with foam. Looking more closely, he saw, a mile beyond the rocks, the great silken surface gently heave, a rise so wide, so gradual that at first he thought it was some trick of the sunlight on his eyes. But the slow swelling moved: it came towards the outermost rock, and slowly swept half over it, leaving behind a hundred white cascades that fell reluctantly away, tearing at the rock with envious foaming fingers, while the main volume passed on unbroken.

There was something terrifying about this smooth moving weight of water, this hidden power, betrayed only by the perpetual snarl of foam where its progress was resisted, that gave a greater sense of implacability than the anarchic rage David had seen on the day of his arrival. He watched, time after time, the slow glimmering upheaval, and his ears were filled with the unending crash from the rocks, until he felt afraid. The tumult of storm he could understand, and brace his soul against it: but this was treachery, the indolent stir that could take men and boat and smash them without sign of anger.

He sat, fascinated, and was just deciding to go farther along the beach, when a shot jangled his nerves like a stone



flung at a harp. He sprang to his feet, looked around, and saw John, less than twenty yards away, standing sideways on to him, holding a shot gun, and peering ahead. As David stared, he went forward towards a thick bank of bracken on the right.

Recovering from his start, and glad to be roused from contemplation of the sea, David hailed him. He started in his turn, looked about, and finally saw David. His mouth was a little open, and his eyes were colourless, like a cat's in the sunlight.

David went to join him.

"Good morning. What are you after? Rabbits?"

John eyed him without expression.

"Are you after rabbits?"

John uttered an affirmative grunt, and proceeded towards the bracken, taking no further notice of his companion. David fell into step beside him.

"There are a lot about here. I expect you have trouble in keeping them down."

John grunted again. A rabbit, which had been crouching in a tuft of grass, shot up and bounded towards the bracken. John raised his gun and bowled the rabbit over. It lay for a second kicking and squealing, then got up and ran into the bracken. With an oath, John ran after it.

The bracken grew tall and rank. Almost at once John was up to his middle. He threshed about, swearing, and disappeared. Evidently there was a hollow in the ground: or perhaps he was stooping.

Surprised, David waited for him to come out again. He could see, by the waving tips of the bracken, where he was, and once or twice caught a glimpse of his head and shoulder. Wondering whether to go and help, he had just

decided that he would rather John found and killed the rabbit, when a second shot sounded. There was silence: then a sudden outburst of squealing chilled David's blood. This was no rabbit: it was shrill, angry, venomous. As he stared, there came a wild shriek, the bracken parted, and John appeared, without his gun, clawing frantically at himself and running as if for his life.

What followed haunted David's dreams. The bracken hissed horribly into life, and a horde of little darting red things streaked through it and after the fugitive. With a gasp of horror, David saw that they were weasels. They streamed from the bank, ten, twenty, thirty of them: in a series of serpentine bounds they made after John, the foremost caught him, and began swarming like ginger lice up his legs and thighs: and over all rose that hellish squealing, high, furious, utterly vindictive, paralysing to hear.

Beating with his hands, John ran crookedly down the beach to the sea. The little devils had him. They sprang and stuck as if thrown in handfuls, hanging on with teeth and claws: the few that fell pursued and sprang again. They were on his shoulders, about his neck. He stumbled, recovered himself, and ran on, hard driven, screaming like a horse.

David felt the earth heave under him. He turned sick, then blazed with angry loathing. A shout tore from his throat, leaving it raw. Instinctively, without plan, he ran after the weasels.

Bent double, demented with terror, John had reached the sea. He blundered in a few steps over his knees, then fell forward in a welter of foam and twisting tawny bodies. He half got up, and grovelled forward again, making for deeper water. A high yell broke from him, and he pulled

madly at something hanging from his ear. Shuddering, David saw the thin red body stretch and come away. Then John, now in above his middle, plunged right under.

The manœuvre succeeded. In a second the surface of the water was foul with little swimming heads, pointed for shore. A number who had not gone in were running up and down on the sand, whimpering shrilly. David roared again, and bore down upon them, waving his arms. They turned, their eyes bright and hard. He had no weapons, but a heavy lump of turf he had snatched up as he came. He bounded forward, flung this into the midst of them, and then kicked sand in clouds. They scattered, running away on either side, then hesitated, rearing up horribly on their hind legs.

Whether they would have attacked him he never knew, for his attention was caught by a sound he hoped never to hear again—the high, babbling gargle of a drowning man. John, having lost his balance, could not get up again, and was threshing about helplessly, drowning in four feet of water.

David could afterwards recall no decision to go to his rescue. He found himself in the sea, plunging forward, the water dragging at his legs and thighs. John's eyes were tight shut: his mouth was open, and his beard was all over froth.

"Steady, man, steady. It's all right."

David grabbed him, and at once was seized in a frenzied grip. John was leaping about as if he were in fire instead of water. It took all David's strength to keep upright.

"Stop it! You'll have us both over."

Out of his depth, or in shallower water, it would have

been simple: but here, up to his chest, it was terribly hard. A spasm of fear went through David. He wrestled, loosed his right arm, and, clubbing it, cracked John hard twice on the jaw. The blows had no effect. He might as well have hit a rock. With a violent effort, he yanked the struggling man to one side, raised a foot, lost his balance, but, as he rolled over backwards, forced him away with the full power of his leg. The fingers still held on, but David's coat slipped, and, with a wild twist, he got free of it. Shooting away on his back, he stood up, watched his chance, and then, as John collapsed, he seized him by the hair and dragged him into shallow water, where he could get him under the armpits and pull him up on the beach.

As he landed, he heard shouting somewhere up on the bank behind him, but was too far spent to heed it. The moment he had John safely out, he let his body sag, and sat, his head between his knees, trying to get back his breath. As if through a curtain, he heard heavy steps shuffling in the sand, heard his name called; and, looking up, saw Owen towering above him.

"Mr. Heron. What happened him? Is he dead?"

Coughing, and turning aside to spit out water, David rolled over to his knees.

"Indeed he is not. He'll be all right in a minute."

He looked at John. The narrow face was clay coloured: mucous disfigured his moustache and beard, and he was bleeding from a score of tiny bites about the face and neck.

"Here. Help me roll him over. Wait—keep his face out of the sand."

A few vigorous strokes, and John began to cough and spew feebly.

"There. Sit him up now. That's all right. How do you feel?"

Becoming conscious of David's hand on his shoulder, John opened his eyes, and recoiled with a gesture like a spitting cat. His bloodshot eyes were full of terror.

"It's all right. They're gone."

But John recoiled still farther. The fear in his face sharpened to hostility, and David realised with a shock that it was from him that John was recoiling.

"God between us and harm!" Owen was startled out of his calm. "Was it the weasels bit him?"

"It was."

In two or three sentences, David told him what had happened.

"I saw him in the water, and I saw you go to get him. That was a brave thing to do, Mr. Heron. Those animals might have attacked yourself."

John's hand went up to his jaw.

"He hit me. He tried to kill me."

David laughed angrily.

"I had to hit you, to make you let go, or you'd have drowned us both. Don't be such a fool, man. If I'd wanted to kill you, I only had to leave you where you were. You were drowning beautifully."

Owen, who had been looking gravely from one to the other, nodded several times.

"That is true. I saw what Mr. Heron did, John. You should be thanking him, not talking that way. Do not mind him, Mr. Heron. He got a shock."

David forced a smile. "I don't feel too good myself. I suggest we all go back to the cottage and have a dram."

He got up. "Can you walk?" he asked John.

Sulkily, without any abatement of his hostility, John got up.

"You'd better let me treat those bites," David said. "Those little brutes' teeth mightn't be too clean." He turned to Owen. "Has anything like this happened before? Do they always hunt in packs like that?"

"I have known them hunt in a pack after rabbits, but never to attack a man."

"He was following up a wounded rabbit," David said. "He disappeared into the bracken, I heard him shoot again, and then those little beasts were after him like insects swarming. Ugh!"

"What did you do, John?" Owen spoke severely, as if John were to blame.

"I shot a weasel," John mumbled. "It was at my rabbit."

"Did you kill it?"

"I blew it in half: and they were on me."

He began to weep, thinly and hysterically.

"Shut up!"

The words, peremptorily snapped out, hurt David's throat. They were effective, but earned him a glance of undisguised hatred.

Two minutes' walking brought them to the cottage. John was most unwilling to enter, but Owen gave him no choice. There was no sign of Sheila.

"Pity she's not here," David said. "She could have fetched him his clothes."

Owen's brows came down at him suspiciously, but he was in no mood to worry about that. Bidding him help John off with his things, he went upstairs, stripped, and rubbed himself down. His arms were weak, and his hands shaking still. He put on pyjamas and dressing-gown, and came down with bandages and iodine to attend to John.

"Here's a towel. No. Better wait till I've dealt with you."

The bites were small, and superficial; John's thick tweed trousers had protected him well. The only bad ones were on one side of his neck, and on the lobe of his right ear. His right hand was badly lacerated: there was hardly any skin left on the back.

"This'll sting a bit, I'm afraid," said David cheerfully.

John hissed and spat as he dabbed on the iodine, but he kept still, and allowed himself to be bandaged where it was necessary. Owen stood over him watching, a grim silent sentinel: once David had to ask him to move out of the light. John uttered no sound after his first hisses. His colour was beginning to come back, and his eyes darted cold green glances right and left.

"Now. Put this coat over you. Warm enough?"

"Mr. Heron is asking are you warm enough, John." Owen spoke severely. He believed in courtesy.

John gave a grunt which might have been yes, and David, shoving the lint and bandages aside, went to the cupboard.

"Now," he said. "To keep out the chill. The invalid first." He poured John out half a glassful. "You?" he raised his brows at Owen.

Owen hesitated, then bowed. His reluctance was obvious.

"I thank you. I have done nothing to earn it."

David made no comment, but poured it out, and gave himself a stiff peg too. He felt weak in the legs, and sat down.

"Ah. That's better. Where did those little brutes go? Did you see?"

"But I did not watch them. I was concerned with John and yourself."

"We were concerned with ourselves. Weren't we, John?" The whiskey, going through him, made David feel friendly and emotional. "You don't really think I tried to harm you, do you?"

"He could not think that," said Owen: but John, though he managed an embarrassed squint, did not reply.



## XV

HUNGRY AND CARRYING two good-sized trout, David headed for home. He was tired, his face was stinging from sun and wind, and he whistled as he trudged along. It was too soon: there must be a snag somewhere, in this place as in all others. But there was no doubt that, irresponsibly, from a clear sky, he was feeling happy and well.

There was no sign of the old woman, nor of her dogs, though by now their protests were becoming more formal. There was no sign of Peadar either, and that was a pity, for it would have been good to show him the trout and confute his gloomy prophecies. As he drew near home, however, he saw Elizabeth standing in front of the farm and looking at him.

Out of his new-found content, he waved a hand. She acknowledged the gesture with a dignified movement of her own, then, to his surprise, came down as if to speak to him.

"Look!"

He held up the trout for her admiration, but she paid no heed.

"The priest," she said anxiously. "The priest is above in the house, waiting on you."

The devil he is, thought David. Aloud he said, "He won't have to wait much longer. If he's good, I'll offer him one of these for his supper."

A shadow crossed Elizabeth's face, as if she thought this was no way to speak. She paused, then nodded, and he felt her watching him as he went on.

When he came near the cottage, Sheila peeped round the back and beckoned to him. By way of reply, he held up the fish. She beckoned again, then came running towards him at an angle, taking care to keep out of sight of the living-room window.

"Who said I'd never get a trout out of the river?"

"Father Morrissey," she said, hissing on the sibilant. "The priest. He is in the house."

David looked at her, smiling.

"Isn't that nice!"

Her brow wrinkled for an instant before she smiled back.

"He will be staying to supper," she said. "I have laid an extra place."

For an instant he felt a stir of annoyance. Evidently the priest's whim was law and they were all in dread of him. Sheila was not consulting him; she was simply stating a fact.

"I hope there's plenty for us both," he said. "If there is not, cook these."

She gave the trout a quick glance.

"He will like the meat better," she said. "There will be plenty of trouts offered him wherever he goes."

"I don't count, I suppose."

His tone was still cheerful, so she gave him a smile.

"I will do them for you in the morning for your breakfast. Then you can eat them both yourself."

"That's the character you give me, is it?"

He swung the trout at her bare legs, and with a dexterous skip she took them from him. Well, thought David, I'm ready for his reverence. Full of resolve not to let the priest ruffle him, he went through the front door and into the living-room.

The priest was standing in front of the book-case with his back to the door. David had time to see that he was short and thickset, when he turned, revealing a paunch and a round red face. Except for a few tufts of coarse grey hair, he was bald.

"I have the advantage of ye, Mr. Heron." The voice was surprisingly musical. "For ten minutes now I have been looking at your books; and a man's books are a good introduction."

"Even when they're a selection which he has brought away—including at least a dozen he has always meant to read, and never will?"

The priest tilted up his head. His neck was short and thick; he was wide across the shoulders, short in the arm, and the backs of his hands, David saw, were covered with strong black hairs.

"Even so, there is a basis for assumption. These are the books ye would read if ye could. Together with those which we may presume ye have read—and, judging by the dates ye have added to your name in them, there are several—the whole collection makes, as I said before, a good introduction."

"Well," David said, smiling, "perhaps you have the advantage of me."

"Let me repair that. John Morrissey, at your service. Priest of this parish—and that's about all he has to say for himself. Did ye get any fish?"

"Only two."

"Will ye listen to the false pride in his voice!" He turned again to the book-case, putting back the volume in his hand and taking up another. "Ye were lucky to get several of these books through the customs."

"Are books dutiable?"

"Some are forbidden."

"On the Index? Surely I have nothing to merit ecclesiastical displeasure?"

"Ye have several that merit state displeasure."

"Free State displeasure," said David. "All the same, I'm told that there is more church than state about it." He looked at the back of the priest's neck, noting with displeasure the hairs that sprouted out and fell over his greasy collar, with its sprinkling of scurf. "I've never been able to understand this theory of negative salvation."

"Negative salvation?" Father Morrissey was picking the books up, one after another, and peering at their titles.

"I mean the theory of shepherding souls to heaven by keeping dangerous things out of their way. To my ignorant mind, salvation implies some power to choose. This notion that you can achieve virtue by eliminating opportunities for vice—I don't understand it."

"Think yourself lucky ye don't have to understand it." As David was silent, momentarily disconcerted by this reply, the priest went on: "Seager's *Life*. H'm. He lived here, ye know."

"I know. Did you ever meet him?"

"I did."

"Did you like him?"

"He talked well." Father Morrissey put the book back. "He was very good company over a bottle. *Trois Contes*. Flaubert." His accent was execrable. "I am glad to see you reading him."

"Why?"

"He is not read enough nowadays. And a Tacitus too."

He came away from the book-case, taking off his spectacles and slipping them with a clatter into a large coffin-like

case, which he tucked down into some pocket in the neighbourhood of his armpit. "Mr. Heron, I perceive that we have plenty of common ground for discussion. Ah, Sheila,"—for at that moment the door was pushed open—"is the dinner ready?"

"I'll have it in for you in two minutes, Father. I'm laying it now."

"Good."

He rubbed his hands together, and went over to the window. David, incensed at his manner of taking charge, looked at him with disfavour. A coarse peasant type, he stood, stroking his unshaven chin with a thick calloused forefinger, and breathing noisily through his nose. The evening sun revealed that his clothes shone with grease, where they were not too crumpled to present a surface to the light.

"Are ye liking it here, Mr. Heron?"

The question cut so sharply across David's thought that he could hardly find an answer.

"Ah, well," the priest went on, "that is a difficult question to be asked so soon. I have often heard strangers complain in Dublin that they are asked their impressions of the city before they have been five minutes in it. If ye don't like this place yet, ye soon will."

"I think I have been here long enough to know my own mind about it."

"And ye like it. Reluctantly—but ye like it."

Sheila came in again, bringing the dishes.

"It's kind of ye, now, to invite me to dine with ye, even though ye did it by proxy. I accepted in my own person, which was shameless of me, I know, but we get few strangers hereabouts, and it is a pleasure to have the chance of talking to an educated man like yourself. I get

rusty, ye know—here, child, give that to me. Ye can't carry them all at once, ye'll drop them. I get rusty, and I'm glad to get news of the world outside."

He rubbed his hands together as the food was put before him, crossed himself, and began to eat. He ate with a concentration, careful rather than gluttonous, which excluded David altogether. Except for the uncouth noises he made over his food, snortings and vigorous mastications, with an occasional pause to remove gristle from between his teeth with finger and thumb, he consumed the first course in silence. David, half amused, half irritated, followed his example, covertly studying him as he ate. For that matter, he might have stared, for Father Morrissey paid him no attention. His world was bounded by his plate and the area of discoloured cloth immediately around it.

When he had finished his chop, and pursued with a soppet of bread the last speck of gravy, the priest wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and emitted a loud sigh of content.

"They killed that lamb yesterday," he said.

"Really? I should have thought it would be better to let it hang longer."

"It does very well. The little girl is not a bad cook, not a bad cook at all."

"I find her very satisfactory," said David drily.

"Ye do? Good. What has she next for us, I wonder? Will I call her?"

"Don't disturb yourself," David rose quickly. "I'll do that."

As he opened the door, it struck him that he had never yet used Sheila's name. While he hesitated, she came out of the kitchen. She had heard him get up.

"Are you ready?"

He saw her teeth in the lamplight as she smiled. She

went back into the kitchen, and a few moments later appeared with the second course.

"Now, that's what I call a sensible girl," pronounced Father Morrissey. "Some people would come in first to clear away. I saw a fool of a girl do that in a hotel I was in at Westport, making two journeys for herself where one would have been enough. I might have known she didn't come from these parts. Isn't that so, Sheila?"

The girl smiled at him sideways. With distaste, David perceived that she liked the priest. There was, he saw reluctantly, a coarse male magnetism about the man, as he sat back in his chair, assured, at ease, complacently picking his nose. Years of dealing with these people had given him authority. Yet there was something more than that—a real strength of personality which David, for all his fastidiousness, could not but feel.

"Apple pie," proclaimed the priest. "D'ye know what it is, Mr. Heron—the girl knows my taste. I only hope you share it."

"Fortunately I do."

"Fortunately indeed. Even if it was purgatory to ye, she'd have made it."

"Indeed, now, Father!" Sheila shied like a young colt in her pleasure.

"Get away out of that," said the priest. "We'll tell ye more about it when we're after eating it. Thank ye," he said, as David passed him a generous portion. "Thank ye very much."

The sugar was damp in the small cracked basin. Father Morrissey grunted, and dug it out with the handle of his spoon. Some of the sugar adhered to the handle, and David watched shrinkingly to see him take hold of it. He did, without noticing the sugar at all.

"Indeed, now," he repeated, his mouth full of fruit and pastry, "she's not a bad little cook at all. The Brosnans do be always barging at her, and saying how badly she works: but I never saw it at all."

"Nor do I," said David. "She works very well."

"For you," said the priest pointedly, "as for me."

"You mean, she takes more trouble for us? I must say, she has some excuse. It seems to me those uncles of hers have a very strange attitude towards her. You say they complain of her work, yet they fuss about her coming here; they hardly let her out of their sight."

"Ah, well," said the priest, his voice muffled, "it's understandable."

"Forgive me, but I don't see why?"

Father Morrissey looked up sharply. His small pig-eyes went smaller.

"D'ye not know whose child she is?"

For reply, David pointed to the portrait over the mantelpiece.

"Owen's sister, wasn't she?" he said.

The priest nodded. "She was. But do ye not know the child's father?"

"I know he went away when she was quite small."

"But ye don't know his name?"

"No. Who was he?"

Father Morrissey pointed to the portrait. "The boyo who painted that," he said.

"Seager!"

"That same, none else. Come now, Mr. Heron, ye don't tell me that ye have been in this place nearly a fortnight without seeing that? And you a writer?"

David sat back, staring at him. "I must be blind. I never saw it. I never thought of it."



"I'd have thought it would be a familiar situation to ye. Just the sort of thing ye'd expect in a novel."

"Perhaps that's why I didn't expect it in real life."

"Well," said the priest, "it is so. Will ye give me a little bit more of that apple, if ye please? I'm very partial to the pastry. Thank ye. It is so; and ye can understand the good folk's anxiety about the girl."

"Lest she should go the same way, with me as the base deceiver?"

"Your trained mind is grasping the situation, I see."

David wanted to say "I suppose that's why you have come to have a look at me," but did not quite dare.

The priest finished his apple, and half ironically, David offered him a third helping, which he declined in complete seriousness. They got up and went over to the fire: and Sheila, hearing the scrape of the chairs, came in to clear away.

"Very good, Sheila girl," commented the priest. "Very good indeed. It's a certificate for cooking we'll be giving ye, Mr. Heron and myself."

She smiled, and clattered the things quickly on to the tray.

"Will you be wanting anything more?" she asked, looking straight at the priest.

"I won't. I don't know about Mr. Heron here?"

"Nothing, thanks."

Sheila stood, still looking at the priest.

"Will you not be stopping the night, Father?"

"Indeed, now," began the priest: when David cut in with as cordial an invitation as he could improvise.

"Well, now, it's very kind of ye," said Father Morrissey. "It would be a convenience to me, I don't mind confessing. It's a long traipse back."

"You weren't thinking of walking, surely?"

"And how else would I go? Sure, I walk miles."

"Did you walk all the way here?"

"I did not. I got a lift in the grocer's van. It's a fine night, and it would be no great penance to walk the length of it back. But I'd sooner go in the morning. I can get a lift half the way then. Good night, Sheila girl. I'll sleep here on the sofa. Bring me a couple of blankets, that's all. You'll want to be off now."

Sheila accepted her dismissal promptly, and the priest stretched out his feet to the fire.

"Ah," he said. "Ye've no idea the distances I have to go in a parish the size of this. I have the whole island, and then the mainland as far down as the peninsula on the one side, and up to Berrow on the other. If I wasn't able to use me legs, sure, I'd be useless. I'd be as fat as a porpoise, too. It's the saving of me."

"Do you walk in all weathers?"

"In all weathers. Mind ye, if I can get a lift I take it, and if I can find a horse to carry me, I ride it. But the places I have to go, a person often can only reach them on foot."

He gave a loud laugh, so abrupt that it made David jump.

"I was called out one night early this spring, the wildest, wettest divil of a night you could wish to see. Would I go up to Hugh McGettigan's, above in the mountains, for his boy Danny had been stretched on his bed for a week, and not a bite or sup would he take, and he apt to die.

"I don't know if ye know the mountains on the other side there, but the place is all of sixteen miles from me little presbytery. I went down to the village, and borrowed the lend of a horse. It was an old horse out of a cart, but sure, it was better than nothing. I rode that horse ten

miles up into the mountains, and left it at a cottage up at the head of a glen, past which ye can ride no further. I was soaked to me skin, and there was a raw patch on the inside of me thigh, where the wet horse and the wet trouser-leg had been too much for one another."

He laughed again.

"How I made the rest of that distance without losing meself, or falling in a bog, or being destroyed on the rocks, none but the God above me knows. Some of the time I was walking on me two feet, and some of the time I was crawling on me belly, and some of the time I was on me hands and the side of me face—not counting the times when I was on me backside. But I got through at last, and they showed me up to a little bit of an attic, where this poor divil of a boy, and he not twenty years old, was lying stretched on a bed, white as a curd.

"I couldn't sit on the bed, for I was running wet. I stood there beside him, the water in rivers down me legs.

"‘Tell me, me son,’ says I to him. ‘What ails ye?’

"He made no answer. Just lay and stared at the wall.

"‘Come, me son,’ says I, ‘ye’re all right now. Tell me what is your trouble.’

"He wouldn't answer me. He just kept his face to the wall.

"‘Me son,’ said I, louder, ‘I’m after coming sixteen miles over the mountain in all this storm of wind and rain to bring ye comfort, so speak up now, and don’t be wasting me time.’”

The priest spread out his hands.

"Divil the word out of him! Divil the word. I began to get impatient.

"‘Look at here,’ says I, ‘I can’t help ye if ye don’t tell me what’s wrong. I’m not going to stand here getting me death,’ says I, ‘So speak up quickly, now.’

"But he still wouldn't speak a word. I stamped on the floor, shaking out a quart of water. 'Listen to me now,' said I, 'this is the last word I'll say to ye. Either ye'll tell me what's troubling ye, and why I have been fetched here in this infernal night, or I'll get out and leave ye to die in the full burden of your sins.'

"Still there wasn't a squeak out of him. I went to the door, and opened it.

"'For the last time,' says I, roaring like a bull, 'will ye tell me, or will I leave ye to perdition?'

"He said nothing. Then, just as I was stamping off down the stairs, he looked round, and opened his gob like a frog.

"'I'm in love!' says he."

The priest let a bellow of laughter.

"What on earth did you say to him?" David asked, when the noise had ceased.

"I began," said the priest, "but sure, I was too wet. I went below, and turned the women out, and stripped in front of the fire and rolled myself in a blanket. They gave me a good cup of whiskey, and then, bedad, the funny side of it came over me, and I wasn't angry any more."

It was very naturally told. David warmed to him, and was at once obliged to resist. O-ho! said he to himself, his reverence is trying to impress me with his devotion to his flock! I'll prick his complacency.

Before he could speak, Father Morrissey yawned, showing a number of jagged and discoloured teeth. "Sure," he said, "the queerness of the people would fill volumes. If I were a writer like yourself, now, Mr. Heron, I should never want for matter."

"Well," said David, "you can tell me something to be going on with. Tell me about your colleague who lives in the cave."

"My colleague who lives in the cave?" repeated the priest slowly, as if he did not understand.

"Your predecessor, perhaps I should say. You know—the chap who mops and mows and wears a monk's hood. He has been on my conscience ever since I saw him. Isn't he on yours?"

A glint shot out of the little eyes.

"I appreciate your solicitude, Mr. Heron, both on his account and on mine. It is not needed; and I advise ye not to meddle with him."

"Meddle with him? My dear Father! My only concern was to stop him meddling with me."

Briefly he related the encounter on the beach. Father Morrissey sighed.

"Ah, the poor fellow," he said, "it's a pity to add to his misery."

"The story is a horrible one, certainly. I can understand your wishing to keep it quiet."

"I can't think how ye heard it. The people are exceedingly loyal."

"I got it by blackmail," replied David lightly. "I threatened to have him certified. I used to be a medical man."

"I can hardly congratulate ye on your methods," said the priest.

David bowed. "For that matter," he said—and was interrupted by a single loud knock on the door.

"Come in!" bellowed the priest; and David again felt anger at his assumption of authority.

The door was pushed open and, to David's amazement, Peadar put his head round. He ignored David, and looked at the priest.

"Good evening, Father."

"What do ye want?" countered Father Morrissey.

"It's Martha. Will ye look at her, Father? She's sick."

"Martha!" The priest's face reddened, and he raised his voice. "And why are ye calling me? It's a vet you should call. Martha," he explained, turning to David, "is the man's cow. The most indestructible, leathery jackass of an animal you could imagine. He's clumsy with them. Every cow he has had has died on him: but sure, nothing would kill this one. It's my belief he feeds her on seaweed."

"I do not, then," replied Peadar indignantly. "She has the best provision that's in it."

"Well, give her more of the best provision that's in it, and let me alone."

"Ah, Father, will ye come. It's the way someone is after casting a spell on her." He gave David a malevolent glance. "Let ye come now, Father, and take it off of her."

"Spell!" bellowed the priest. "I'll spell ye, ye superstitious old rascal! Get out of my sight!"

"Ah, Father——"

"Give the animal a drench and have sense."

Peadar shook his head. "Drenches is no good against a spell," he said sadly. "It's only yourself can take it off of her."

"Well," said the priest, "I won't take it off of her."

"Sure, Father, what'll happen to me poor cow?"

"Ah, get out, man. Trust in the mercy of God."

Peadar stayed in the doorway, his face working. Then, deciding his quest was useless, he shot David a glance of violent spite and departed, banging the door.

Father Morrissey yawned again. "They're a superstitious lot around these parts," he said. "That old fella, now, he's ignorant, ye could hardly expect him to know any better. But they're all the same. Here's John Brosnan, now, telling me ye set a pack of weasels on him."

David was startled into indignation.

"I like that!" he exclaimed. "The brutes chased him into the water. He swallowed pints and started to drown, and I had to go in and lug him out."

The priest nodded. "Ah, ye wouldn't credit the things they believe. It's old land hereabouts, and the past is very near us. Whisht!"

He held up his hand, and cocked an ear. David listened. There was a faint shuffling outside the door, which was suddenly flung open, revealing Peadar, his lean face convulsed with rage. He looked across at Father Morrissey, his beard wagging.

"The mercy of God is a poor thing to be trusting for a man's one cow!" he cried.

The priest sprang up in his chair.

"Be off out of this, ye blaspheming old divil!"

He made to pick up something from the table and hurl it at Peadar, who fled at once.

The priest stood still, and listened to his retreating footsteps. He let his bellowing laugh, and went over to shut the door.

"D'ye see what I have to put up with? Wouldn't they break your heart?"

"Tell me," said David, "one thing's been puzzling me here—the way the people speak. Peadar speaks more like what I regard as Irish. So do you, if you don't mind my saying so. But the rest don't seem to me to have an Irish accent at all."

"They're islanders here. Their speech is different. What you're hearing here is the old grave Elizabethan. Peadar comes from the mainland; and I'm a Meath man."

He sat down again, stretched out a foot, and kicked the fire. There was a short silence.

"I'm sorry John dislikes me," said David, as lightly as he could. "To the best of my knowledge, I've never done him any harm."

"Ah, he's a queer fella. Always has been. If ye get off on the wrong foot with him, ye're done. But I wouldn't let it worry ye; he's of small account."

"I got off on the wrong foot with them all, I'm afraid."

He told the priest the story of his arrival. "That brings me to another thing I wanted to ask you," he went on: "a thing that made me drop a real brick with the Brosnans."

"Yes?"

"It was that church: the church that's all stripped bare. I was asking them about it, and then I saw that they had made an ingle-nook out of some of the pew-ends. At least, I suppose that's where they came from? The enquiry naturally didn't endear me to them."

"Ah," said the priest, "ye'll see scores of them around the country, and not only in ingle-nooks either. Four of them put together make a very good pig-sty. I could get ye several testimonials to that effect."

David's eyebrows rose. "That doesn't worry you in your official capacity?"

"It does not."

David eyed him edgeways. "A sojourn in this part of the world seems to toughen the digestion for scandals. This must have been an even bigger scandal than the other."

"It was," said the priest quietly. He looked at David, "Do ye want to hear about it?"

"That's what I've been leading up to."

"Very well, then, Mr. Heron, ye shall. It's a long story I'll shorten it all I can.



"It goes back to the potato famine. The famine fell terribly upon these districts of the west. At its height, when the people were lying by the sides of the roads, their shrivelled mouths green with eating grass, and dying in scores, a number of English people and other Protestants came here with hot soup and good food. They offered the soup and food to the starving people, on condition that they renounced their faith and turned Protestant. Many preferred death, even that slow and horrible death. Many, and I could never find it in my heart to blame them, chose to live."

The priest's tone had an edge like a saw.

"A colony was established by these means, and, in 1850 or thereabouts, there was a church built and a minister sent. The church was built close to the village, of which I expect you have seen the ruins on the hillside."

"Yes. I wondered what had emptied it."

"It never prospered. Ye'll accuse me of satisfaction in that, or of wishing to give a twist to the story. But the fact remains, there was disease and other misfortunes. However, I'm telling ye of the Protestant colony.

"By the turn of the century there was only a handful of them left. The leaders were two old brothers. Each of them had some sort of a pension, contingent upon the due observance of their adopted faith. Then one of them fell ill, and came near to death.

"In the hour of his extremity"—the priest's tone was gentler now—"he turned back to the faith he had always maintained in his heart. He asked his brother to send for the priest."

"Yourself?"

"No. My predecessor. 'Don't do it, don't do it,' says his brother to him. 'They will know the truth of it, and I'll lose me little pension.'

"But the dying man insisted, and so a messenger was sent." Father Morrissey chuckled. "When the priest came to the gate," he said, "he found the well brother standing outside, with half a dozen neighbours holding his arms and restraining him. He walked up the path, and the old man began to curse at the pitch of his voice and call him a black-guard, and say that he would never suffer him to cross the threshold. The priest gives a wink to him and his neighbours, and walks in and does his duty with the dying brother, and speeds him out of the world.

"So, ye see, everything was done properly, and the decencies were observed, and the old surviving brother still kept his pension.

"He lived on for three or four years after that, and then he died. It was no longer worth keeping a minister in the place, so the minister went. The dust of his horse had hardly settled before the people swarmed into the church and took everything from it, and left it the shell you see today."

He stopped and leaned forward, placing his stubbly fingers together. There was an odd power in the way he had told the story which affected David strongly.

He shook himself. "That's a terrible story," he said.

"It is," said the priest. "Terrible from your angle, terrible from mine."

"How do you know what is my angle?"

"I don't. I only know that it's different from mine: and you've admitted that you find the story terrible."

Father Morrissey was a difficult man to answer. His voice and the weight of his personality made much that he said sound final, and left the other party at a disadvantage for a reply. Studying him, as he sat back, glancing about the room, David was puzzled by an uneasy liking for the

man. He saw clearly that the priest's attitude towards him was indifferent, almost contemptuous. Worse, he behaved as if the place were his own, ordering Sheila about and taking everything for granted. He was physically repulsive, rather dirty, and had unpleasant habits. By all reckonings, David knew he should dislike him vehemently.

Father Morrissey got up out of his chair, and went over to the bookcase.

"I see you read Plotinus," he observed: and for the next hour and a half, until they said good night, he kept the talk firmly to philosophy and books in general.

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## XVI

THE MOON ROSE late. Before moonrise, the night grew darker and more still. The cottage squatted, an angular shadow, with the mountain an amorphous gloom behind it. The tide was falling, and, as it receded down the shelving beach, its sound fell from a rhythmic sigh to a whisper. Gradually the eastern sky paled, and the outline of the mountain grew dark and hard. A breeze stirred, and died. Two donkeys at the back of the farm began to fidget. One stamped his foot three times, and brayed. The other tossed his head, and trotted a few steps.

Then the edge of the moon pushed itself up brightly over the mountain's rim. It looked at first like liquid about to spill into the valley: but, in a surprisingly short time, it heaved itself up, wobbling, and became recognisable as the moon, unwieldy and over-sized. The sky was swiftly drained of darkness, and a small surprised cloud stood alone in the luminous space. Another minute, and the great moon, struggling still with its own weight, lifted itself clear of the mountain and floated in the sky.

A deeper stillness followed. Farm and cottage jutted up sharply from their black pointed shadows. A sudden commotion of small birds roused from sleep broke out on the moor behind, lasting for over a minute. Then there was stillness again.

The moon was high now, sailing in splendour, mistress of the skies. But not for long. The short summer night was nearly over. The light in the east strengthened, flatter-

ing the moon, until the sky over the mountain became brighter than that around her. At once, she was seen to lose brightness, and to shrink in size. Her markings grew darker and clearer. But she had strength yet, and on the seaward side of the cottage the shadows still fell black.

Just as the sky paled into dawn, David, hearing a footstep outside, jumped out of his bed and went to the window. Keeping well to one side, so as not to be seen, he saw Father Morrissey coming up to the front door. The priest glanced furtively up, then disappeared into the porch. A minute later David heard him creeping about downstairs.

Grinning maliciously, David got back into bed. He knew, with complete certainty, what had happened. The old man had been to see Peadar's cow after all. He was shy about appearing to be the medicine man, afraid the sophisticated young man from the city would make fun of him!

This discovery so exhilarated David that he fell asleep at once, and slept soundly till breakfast time.

The exhilaration persisted as he got up. Nothing had given him so much pleasure for years. Here was he, deferring to the man, impressed by him, submitting to him: and all the time the priest had been deferring to *him*, to the extent of sheer hypocrisy, pretending to go to bed, and then slipping out when he thought David was safely asleep. It was a discovery comparable to finding that a person whom one has admired and longed hopelessly to approach has been feeling the same way about oneself.

Father Morrissey was some time coming to breakfast, and David greeted him cheerfully. He looked less attractive than ever. The grey stubble jutted from his cheeks and jowl, his eyes were red-rimmed, and he blinked in the clear morning sunlight.

After helping him to coffee and the congealing bacon and eggs, David could keep in his malice no longer.

"Well. How was Peadar's cow?"

If the priest was chagrined at detection, he did not show it.

"She was none too well; but I hope she'll do." He filled his mouth uncouthly, gobbled, and then gave a half laugh. "I lay down, but I got the beast on me conscience, and I had to get up and go to her."

David said nothing. With a single stroke, the priest had upset his house of cards. He felt as if a chair had been pulled from under him, and struggled between a conviction of his own meanness of heart and admiration at the cunning with which the priest extricated himself from a difficulty.

"He is a good old fellow, Peadar," said the priest. He sucked up the dregs of his coffee noisily, and passed his cup for more. "I didn't like to leave him uneasy in his mind. They're primitive here, you know. Because I care for their souls, they charge me with their bodies."

"It must be a responsibility."

"Of course it's a responsibility."

"In fact," said David, "I expected you'd be here before this." The priest looked at him enquiringly. "To make sure that it was all right about Sheila coming here." Damn it, he thought, he's making me feel a fool, looking at me like that and saying nothing. "Not that there's any reason: but I gathered that you are very particular about the proprieties in this part of the world."

Father Morrissey helped himself to marmalade. He spilled some on the cloth, scraped it up on his thumb, and put it into his mouth.

"I think, ye know, you city men are inclined to over-rate your attractiveness."

"Not at all. I only——"

"The girls in these parts are hard to satisfy. A flirtation with one of them is a wrestling match with an amazon. Ye haven't the physique."

David repressed his annoyance. "Sheila is not like that," he said drily.

"She is not. That's partly why I came. To have a look at ye."

"I see. It wasn't just a social call."

"Oh, bless ye now, it was a bit of both. Combining duty with pleasure. I had a nice dinner and a pleasant talk, and I look forward to more. But I have my flock to look after, ye know, and they come first."

It was all perfectly reasonable and goodhumoured. David smiled, but the corners of his mouth felt stiff.

"Well. Are you satisfied with the results of your professional scrutiny?"

"I am. The girl is in no danger at all."

"I'm safe, am I?"

"Ach, now, isn't that typical of you degenerate city men! When I tell ye I can trust ye with a young girl, instead of being complimented, ye take it as an insult."

"Oh no." David's smile was an effort. He was getting the worst of this all round. "I don't take it one way or the other. Why should I care, after all?"

"As ye say, why should ye care?"

Father Morrissey rose from the table, and felt for his pipe.

"Ye'll admit this, though. Apart from the fact that it would be my duty anyhow, there are special circumstances in this case. The girl is not an ordinary country girl; although she has been brought up as one. She might be susceptible to a man of intelligence from the city, in a way that the ordinary girl here would not."

"You can rest easy, Father. I have no designs on her."

"Faith, it would be no great matter if ye had. I'm obliged to ye, all the same. Now, ye've work to do, I know, and I won't be trespassing upon your time. I'll sit and smoke a pipe for a quarter of an hour, and then I must go."

"How will you go?"

"On me two legs, as far as the village. I can get a car from there."

And, a quarter of an hour later, David, with a queer sense of loss, watched the sturdy black figure stumping purposefully along the road towards the big headland.



## XVII

BEFORE THE WEEK was out, David met Father Morrissey again, in circumstances which he could never have foreseen.

Though he had brought a varied list of supplies, a few necessities which were to have been sent on by post had failed to arrive. David decided therefore to visit Ballyconlon, the little harbour town where the railway ended. He thought first of going to Seaport, but Sheila assured him that there was a good chemist at the harbour town, and he would be able to get what he wanted.

He proposed to hire a car, and asked her to whom he should write. She scolded him.

"It's a waste of money," she said. "You can ride in on the van, the same as we all do."

"The van-man may not like that."

"Indeed he will like it. He is always glad of company."

"Anyway, the van won't bring me back."

"Maybe he will not. But, if you hire a car then, you will only have to hire it for the one double journey, instead of the two."

"That's true," David said.

Sheila's face cleared. She had been quite worried. He smiled after she had gone out of the room, touched, in spite of himself, by her solicitude for his pocket.

The only drawback about riding in the van was that no one knew exactly at what hour it would come. The hour depended upon the weather and a number of other

contingencies. Nobody cared very much when the supplies came, and each stop was a social call. The driver never needed to bring food with him. His problem was to avoid being stuffed to stupefaction, since the people in each cottage expected him to sit down to a pot of tea and whatever was going. He was also a spirited performer on the accordion, and several of his customers possessed one. If the weather was too bad for work out of doors, they would congregate and wait for his arrival, so as to hold an impromptu dance which might last from forty minutes to a couple of hours, according to the number of calls he had to make.

If, on the other hand, the weather was fine, he would stop at a place where the road ran close to the beach and have a bathe.

These practices were amusing enough to David until he found himself dependent on them. He would much have preferred to reach the town in the morning, and have time to explore it. However, the distance was not great. The return journey need take little over an hour, and as long as he got back by bedtime all would be well.

Even so, he found it hard not to fidget as the morning passed by and there was no sign of the van. Although he had nothing to do, and the day was too bright for fishing, his orderly English mind was irritated by having to hang about. By lunch time he found it hard not to snap at Sheila.

Her eyes widened when she heard that he had been waiting close to the house.

"But you need not have waited," she said. "Jimmy would have stayed here till you came back."

Far from appeasing David, this annoyed him more. What was to be hoped from a country and a people where things were done in so slapdash a fashion?

When the van came, soon after two o'clock, his irritation was banished by the beaming good nature of Jimmy the van-man's face. Jimmy was short and plump, with a bright peeled nose and eyes so continually smiling that David was never able to decide what colour they really were. He had thin sandy hair, starting up in affright round a bald patch in the middle of his crown, and his hands were covered with pieces of filthy sticking-plaster.

He expressed the utmost delight at the prospect of taking David to the town, loudly bewailed his late arrival, and offered to start instantly if David pleased.

"Have your lunch first," David said. "I'm in no hurry, truly."

"Is that so? That is very kind of you, sir. I won't be hardly a minute."

It was a good three quarters of an hour before he emerged from the farm, briskly wiping his mouth on the back of his hand; but David had schooled himself to a state of calm, and sat reading, more or less contentedly, near the cottage door.

Catching sight of him, Jimmy looked concerned, and broke into a trot. A minute later they were side by side in the front of the van.

"C'm up!" Jimmy cried, as if to a horse, and with a shattering reverberation the engine leaped into life and the van started. David had been wondering whether he would be expected to make conversation on the journey. He liked motoring, but very much disliked having to talk, preferring to concentrate all his attention upon the scene and the roadside.

Before they had gone a few yards he realised that he need not have worried. Whether Jimmy believed that his guest was in an urgent hurry, or whether he always drove

in this fashion, David did not know. The van charged along, halting suddenly at any particularly bad pot-hole, swerving by with two wheels on the grass verge, snorting, clanking, bumping, vibrating, in a mad energy. Everything shook and rattled, from the gears to the steering wheel, from the single tattered front mudguard that waved like a banner to the doors at the back that were fastened with wire in default of handles. The springs of the seat beneath David had gone, but it had been lined and patched with a number of unnameable substances which reduced the shock. Only now and then, when the back hit him smartly, was he in physical peril. Soon, by sitting forward and bracing his knees, he learned to avoid even this misfortune. Riding in Jimmy's van was active exercise, good for the liver as riding any horse.

Jimmy preferred silence too. He shouted amiably once or twice in a high tenor voice, and David, uncomprehending, nodded as amiably back. This exchange seemed to satisfy Jimmy, and, apart from a yell of greeting to every passer-by, he said nothing from the time they reached the crown of the headland till they rattled cheerfully up to the row of shops beside the little quay.

The harbour town was small, little more than a village. A single line of railway, with a siding in the station itself, ran between the quay-side and the houses. The harbour was horseshoe-shaped. Two drifters and half a dozen smaller fishing boats were in it. A few men in jerseys and long rubber boots were strolling about or sitting on stone posts. A little group of women with baskets, and shawls over their heads, padded desultorily along the street. There was a good deal of white dust, and the sea outside the harbour glittered sharply in the sun.

David wondered whether to tip Jimmy, then decided

against it. What a fool he had been not to ask Sheila. Never mind, he could do so when he got back, if she thought it advisable. He would be seeing Jimmy plenty of times again.

The best place to hire a car, Jimmy assured him, would be from the hotel. Which hotel? There was only the one.

It would be better to go there first, David thought, so as to make sure about getting back. An odd feeling had come over him. He shrank from the activity and movement of this tiny place, and wanted to get back to the seclusion of Kilree.

With a sarcastic shrug at his weakness, he pulled himself together and set out to do his jobs.

The outside of Finnegan's Hotel was not inviting. A glass door, with cracked panels of stained glass at the top, resisted stiffly when he pushed against it, and finally sprang open, releasing a mad jangle above his head. David jumped and swore. The bell continued to clang, then subsided into a long, soundless vibration. David waited for the rushing steps which must follow such a summons, but no one came. Silence settled once more over the small dingy hall-way.

What with the dirt of the glass door and the colours of its upper panels, very little light came through. The most prominent object was a large hat-stand, of elaborate design, made of some kind of polished wood that gleamed dully in the little light it could catch. The pegs projected at right angles, and were of astonishing corpulence, like pillar-boxes, far too large for the tab of any civilised garment. The sole garment that was hanging, a battered old raincoat, had been slung anyhow across one of the pegs, and drooped dispiritedly. For the rest, the hall-way contained an armchair with a broken cane seat, a barometer, which, to judge by the disparity between its hands, had

not been set since a particularly bad spell in mid-winter, and an alcove deep in gloom. There was a faint smell, blended equally of tobacco, cabbage, mutton-fat, and dust, all of them hangovers from a remote past.

At the back of the hall-way was another door. David stepped across and knocked at it. There was no answer. He opened it, and found himself in a dim pantry, full of bottles and glasses. Returning, he gingerly explored the alcove, and, groping, found yet another door. This was more hopeful; it led down a passage. He walked along, past the open doors of two empty rooms, and arrived in a kitchen. At first there was no sign of life. Then a soft thumping made itself heard, and, turning, he found himself amiably regarded by a spaniel which was lying on the floor. It seemed glad enough to see him, but made no attempt to rise.

With a propitiatory word, David went across the kitchen and out into the yard. A strapping and rather dirty girl stood contemplating a bald old rug, which she had hung over a wire clothes-line, evidently with the intention of beating it. She eyed it dubiously, as well she might, for it did not look as if it could stand beating.

Before he could address her, David heard a sound at his side, and saw that the spaniel had followed him. It stretched itself, yawned, and gave a whine of pleasure. The girl looked round, saw David, and smiled.

She did not speak for a moment, and he found himself contrasting her immediately with Sheila, much to her disadvantage. There was a streak of soot on her face, and her frock was greasy and sweat-stained. Sheila was unkempt enough, but there was a difference between her dirt and this girl's dirt.

The girl's smile was frank and friendly.

"Were you wanting anything?" she enquired.

David recovered himself. "I was told that I could hire a car here," he said. His voice sounded prim: he disliked it. "I came in at the front door, but I couldn't make anyone hear. *Can* I hire a car?" he went on, as she said nothing.

She continued to stare at him without answering. Then she gave her left shoulder a heave.

"I will go ask," she said.

She went across the yard into a shed, leaving David standing. The dog, with another faint whine and an apologetic wag of his tail, followed her. David looked round the yard. The walls were broken and discoloured. Against one stood a battered pump, and, just beyond it, a large stack of empty biscuit-tins. Feathers and stains close to the opposite wall suggested that someone had been killing poultry. Above, gulls were wheeling and crying, pure against the mild blue of the sky.

Voices sounded, and the girl came back, followed by a short man in knickerbockers and shirt-sleeves, whom David took to be the proprietor. His arms were all over grease, as if he had been repairing a car, and David's mind jumped in fear that he would not be able to get home.

Mr. Finnegan tilted his head back, and looked at David along a short, deep-veined nose.

"You were enquiring about a car?" he asked.

"Yes. I've come over from Kilree to do some shopping, and I want to be taken back. Not at once, but in about an hour's time."

"In about an hour's time. Yes. That'll be all right."

"Shall I come back here?"

"Please yourself."

"To the front of the hotel?"

"Please yourself."

"I'll ring, shall I?"

"Ah, no. Come through and give us a call. Sure, we're used to the bell."

"Very well."

Mr. Finnegan waved his hand, and went back to whatever he had been doing. The girl smiled at David, and continued to stare at him until he left. The dog had disappeared.

On his way back, David tried to open the door gently, and avoid the clangour of the bell, but it was so arranged that he could not. He dived quickly through and slammed it behind him to escape the din. Then he went off to do his shopping.

The principal shops, three in number, appeared to be run upon a free and easy, communal basis. No unfair competition marred their relationship, for each appeared to carry the same stock. Picture postcards, a row of cheap frocks on hangers, half a dozen pairs of so-called flannel trousers, several jerseys, an oilskin or two in yellow and black, vast jars of bulls' eyes, and an assortment of accordions, were the leading goods in all three. David remedied the gaps in his groceries, but it was a slow business, since each shop contained a number of customers who appeared to be paying calls rather than making purchases, and his insistence on business was almost a breach of etiquette.

The assistant who served him seemed much surprised when he did not demur about prices. This surprised the customers too. By degrees they all stopped talking, to stare at him with a growing incredulity. Half amused, half embarrassed, he realised that he was expected to haggle, and that this immediate acquiescence was depriving them of all pleasure in the transaction.

Then the assistant, a young man with a long face and



fair hair, recovering from his first shock, began to try and take advantage of David's unorthodoxy.

"Would you be wanting an oilskin?" he enquired: and, without waiting for an answer, he lifted one down, a vast garment as stiff as if it had been frozen.

"No, thank you very much."

"Ah, now, you should. The rain does be very heavy in these parts."

"Buy it, mister, buy it, I'm telling ye." One of the customers, an undersized man with a grey moustache, had suddenly pushed his way close to David's side, and was nudging him violently with his elbow. "Be said by me, mister. A better oilskin ye wouldn't find this side of Dublin, or in Dublin itself. Me cousin had one, and he on a drifter and out all weathers. Sure, ye could swim dry in it. Isn't that so?"

He turned to the other customers, and a chorus of asseveration broke out.

"There y'are, mister." The little man's eyes shone with missionary fervour. "Be said by me, now, and ye'll not regret it."

David smiled at him.

"If I want an oilskin, I'll certainly remember and come back for it. But I have a very good raincoat for the present, thank you all the same."

And, quickly collecting his purchases, he went out, leaving them all staring.

The chemist, where he next called, was relatively civilised. True, he had to be roused from somewhere at the back of the shop, but he came in affably enough. To David's astonishment, he was well stocked, and produced each article without demur till the last on the list. At this, he pursed up his lips and shook his head.

"I am sorry, sir, but I could not give you that without a doctor's prescription."

"That's all right. I am a doctor."

"Is that so, sir?" The eyes looked at him shrewdly and were satisfied; the broad face beamed. "Are you here on holiday?"

"Yes, I'm staying over at Kilree."

"Kilree? That's a lonely place."

"Yes, but I like it."

He heard his voice with surprise, and knew that it was speaking the truth.

"Is there anywhere I could get a cup of tea, except at the hotel? I don't much like the look of that."

The chemist considered.

"There is the station," he said dubiously. "Or"—his face cleared—"there is a little place at the far end of the quay, a white-washed cottage with a lot of glass balls outside it. Ye know—the glass floats from driftnets. Tell the old lady there that you're a friend of mine, and she'll fix you up nicely."

"That's very good of you. Thanks."

## XVIII

FORTY MINUTES LATER David was out again, feeling very much better. The old lady in the white-washed cottage had welcomed him with delight, and given him an excellent tea. The only trouble had been to make her accept anything in payment.

He came to the edge of the quay and looked down. The water, a thick green, he judged to be some fifteen feet deep. A number of dead fish, lying on their sides, gleamed blankly from the bottom. A little way further on, a small boy was fishing. David approached to see how he was getting on, and stood watching, when he became aware of a figure standing respectfully a couple of feet behind him.

He turned and saw a puzzled-looking youth, in jersey, trousers, and bare feet, biting his lower lip, and eyeing him sideways from under thick eyebrows. A shock of curly black hair leaned on one side of his head like a crest gone awry. He was tanned a deep red, and was fingering a tattered piece of paper.

"Are yee the doctor?" he enquired.

"I am a doctor, but I don't belong here."

The youth sighed noisily with relief. "I'm to give yee this," he said, and handed David the piece of paper.

It was filthy and sodden, as if it had been left out in the rain. On it was scrawled, in straggling but still decipherable letters, the following message: "Please come immeditly to Aloysius Sheehy, he is terrible sick."

David looked up. The youth was already shambling off.

"Here!" he cried. "This is nothing to do with me. You must take this to the proper doctor."

The youth paused and frowned. He looked upon his task as finished, and did not at all like this complication.

David caught up to him. "I don't live here," he explained, "I am only here for the day." Then, as the youth continued to frown, he asked, "How did you get this?"

The youth burst into sudden volubility.

"A man is after giving it to me down at the steps. He came in a boat and could not stop. He said I was to take it to the doctor."

"Well—isn't there a doctor who lives here?"

"He is away. I took it in to Mr. Duffey, and he said to find yee."

"The chemist? Well—I had better go and see him, I suppose."

And, nodding to the youth, who seemed deeply relieved to be rid of the business, David set off for the chemist.

His first impulse, at sight of the message, had been to drop it and run away. Anything like a recall to those old days of responsibility, to those old demands, had made him shrink inside. Then, almost at once, had come a contrary feeling, a call to adventure. Here at the back of beyond, amongst people who appeared helpless and remote from civilisation and orderly life, he felt what he had so long forgotten, the instinct to take charge. It was like being among children who accepted one on sight as the solution of their troubles.

As he went along to the chemist, his step quickened, and he felt once more the light-heartedness which already had come to him two or three times since his arrival at Kilree.

He turned into Mr. Duffey's as to an old friend's, but the chemist had disappeared and was nowhere to be found.

A laconic notice in the shop said "Back at 6.30." Mr. Duffey had not even bothered to shut the door.

This reverse, instead of discouraging David, made him more persistent. He walked along the street and accosted the first two or three people whom he met. They looked at the note, looked at David, shook their heads, stepped away as if the note were contagious, and denied all knowledge of Aloysius Sheehy.

David went on and turned into the post office. Here he had difficulty in getting attention, for the young lady behind the counter, a tall, good-looking girl with freckles, was happily embarked on a flirtation with a young man from a drifter. The fisherman, dark as she was fair, was an easily-smiling giant in the inevitable india-rubber thigh-boots, with a bandaged thumb.

The young lady did not relish interruption. She patted her back hair and looked at David coolly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, could you tell me the name of the local doctor?"

"Is it Dr. Macdonald you mean?"

"That is what I'm asking."

She paused, and smiled at the young man.

"What has happened to him?" David persisted.

"Dr. Macdonald? He's not here."

"I know that. Where is he?"

"On holiday."

Her eyes returned to the fisherman.

"Hasn't he a locum, a deputy?"

"Pardon?"

"I said, has he not left a deputy?"

She sighed, and raised her brows eloquently at the fisherman.

"I believe there was someone coming," she said.

David felt his colour rise. He shoved his message under her nose.

"Perhaps you can tell me where the person named there lives? It appears to be urgent."

The young lady showed little interest.

"He lives away at Lough Naan," she said, and went on to the fisherman, "And what did she say after that?"

"Look here," exclaimed David. "This man is ill, and an urgent message has come from him. I'm a doctor, but I'm a stranger here. Will you please tell me where Lough Naan is, and how I am to get there?"

She turned again, bored, reluctant.

"Yes?" she said.

"How do I get to Lough Naan, please?"

The tall young fisherman said something in Irish and laughed.

"Ssh!" exclaimed the girl, drooping her lashes at him. She contemplated David, who was quivering with anger. "It's a longish step," she said at last. "Twenty miles or more."

"How do I get there?"

"It would be by boat."

And, with a gesture of finality, she ignored him and returned to the fisherman.

Furious, David banged out and went down to the quay. Indifference and difficulty had made up his mind for him, and he was now passionately identified with the interests of Aloysius Sheehy.

The men from the drifters could not help him. They only knew the way to and from the fishing grounds. But at last, by the steps, he found a couple of local men, showed them the message, and explained his need.

They looked at one another, and the taller shook his head.

"You'll not do it," he said. "There is only the one motor boat, and it's not in it."

"I thought there was a boat with mails? When does that go?"

"Mondays and Fridays only."

The day was Tuesday.

"What about rowing?"

Both shook their heads. "Ah no, sir. It's too far. Too risky. If a storm came on, you'd be no place."

David glanced seaward. "It looks fine enough," he said impatiently.

"Aye. But it would take many hours to get there, and storms come there very sudden, down from the mountains."

"What can I do, then? I must do something."

Once again he had time to marvel at his own decision. They looked at him, dumbly.

"I heard tell," said the shorter man, "the boat from Ardnish was coming in tomorrow for a repair. Maybe she would take the doctor up with her."

"That's too late," David said. "I must get there to-day."

"You couldn't, doctor. There's no way. Not till tomorrow. Then, maybe, they'd take you up with them."

"But how would he get back?" objected the other.

"Never mind about that," David said. "The thing is to get there. If you're *sure* I can't go sooner?"

"Ah, but you must get back, doctor."

"Well, maybe the same boat would bring me back."

"They could hardly do that. You see, it's a long distance, and they work up at the lodge there. There is only the two of them in it, till the family comes next month."

The men, with faces of real concern, went into a long discussion as to how David was to come back. This point

seemed to exercise their minds far more than the question of his getting there.

David interrupted them.

"I'll chance the coming back," he repeated. "Where is this motorboat coming to? Who is going to repair it?"

They stared at him, amazed at such ignorance.

"Sure, Martin McLaughlin will repair it. Who else? He is the only man on the coast who can do it."

"I'll go and see him. Where does he live?"

"We will show you."

"No. Don't trouble. Just tell me."

"No trouble, no trouble at all."

They insisted, with cordial cries, on escorting him past the harbour, to a stone house and yard at the head of a little slip.

The proprietor was evidently a man of many parts. His yard contained everything from tombstones, some finished, some still in the rough, to timber, lobster pots, barrels, coal, and old rusty cars in different stages of decrepitude.

The man himself was not immediately to be found, and the taller of David's companions, with a courteous apology for leaving him, went in search. David began to explore the yard. Tucked away behind two cars, at a rakish angle, leaned a sculptured nymph. The sculptor had shown her surprised at her bath, and she simpered skywards in an ecstasy of maidenly embarrassment. David stared at her, and turned to his companion.

"Where did *she* come from?" he enquired: and saw, too late, that the man was blushing and looking out to sea.

An awkward silence was broken by the return of the other man with the proprietor.

Martin McLaughlin proved to be elderly, with a fine, ascetic face. Remove the stubble from his chin, set a wig



on him, and he would have graced a court of law. He was polite, but not very helpful. He said the boat required attention, and he had no idea how long such attention would take. If the job was a big one, the boat would not be able to return till Thursday.

"But, good Lord," David burst out. "This may be a case of real urgency. The man may be dying. I *must* get to him."

McLaughlin and the two fishermen looked at him, sadly, politely, yet with a hint of reproach.

"Maybe," suggested McLaughlin at last, "it will not be a long job."

"It is apt to be," said the tall man, gloomily shaking his head. "She had not been up for a long time."

"Anyway," David said, "there's no possibility of getting there today?"

Their faces cleared. Here they could be definite.

"None at all, doctor. None at all."

David bade them good-bye, and walked off, conscious that they were looking after him. He felt angry and embarrassed. He was in the right, yet, like old Peadar, they managed to make him feel guilty of ill-breeding. It seemed to be a local talent.

He snorted, kicked at a tin by the roadside, looked up, and saw a small girl staring at him, her finger in her mouth. He smiled at her in exasperation, whereupon she turned, and made off, slowly at first, then as fast as her little fat legs could take her.

Coming to the quay, David slowed up. What was he to do? He stared at the smooth, oily water and the gulls that floated on it, and began to storm at himself for a fool. Why had he mixed himself up in this business? It was nothing to do with him. He had given up practice:

there was no possible obligation on him to go. Get up to the hotel, he told himself. Wash your hands of the whole business, and go home to Kilree. The thought of his room, with Sheila there to give him his meal, seemed inexpressibly attractive. His whole body shrank from the unknown, from the claims of this thing that had been thrust upon him. Why had he been idiot enough to tell the chemist?

But, even while he was telling himself these things, he knew that he could not go back. The call had to be answered. Somewhere up there, miles away, a man was lying, twisting in agony, needing help. To leave him, to ignore the call, would be base and treacherous.

It was no good. If he did ignore it, he would have no peace. His sleep would be haunted with visions of the man moaning there for help that never came. Blast you, David cried to himself, what are you thinking of? You *must* go. There is no question. What have you sunk to, that you can hesitate even for a moment? Besides, you are committed to it now. The whole place will know in half an hour. You must go.

You have no things, argued the last feeble voice. Get 'em from the chemist, he replied to it.

And, relieved, leaning on his obvious duty, he made his way to the hotel.

Mr. Finnegan was washing his arms at the pump. He learned of David's change of plans with interest and concern. Sure, he had a room, and a good room too. It wasn't ready at the minute, but it soon would be.

"Nora!" he bawled. "Nora! Bad cess to the girl. Ye have to be watching her all day."

He pointed his sharp, short nose at a doorway at the side of the yard, and headed for it like a dog after game. Looking down a narrow alleyway, David beheld the maid

reft abruptly from a flirtation with a good looking boy of nineteen or thereabouts. She showed neither embarrassment nor resentment, but the boy blushed to the rims of his projecting ears.

Mr. Finnegan, uttering streams of exhortation, drove her back up the alleyway as if she were a heifer. Reaching the yard, she smiled at David: and Mr. Finnegan, the moment she was out of sight, relapsed happily into calm.

He showed David the room, which was large and crowded with Victorian furniture: roared down to Nora to put "three jars" into the bed, at the same time reassuring David that there was no chill on it, for two commercials were after sleeping in it together only three days back: a statement which David accepted readily enough, since traces of their occupation were still visible.

He followed Mr. Finnegan downstairs again, and saw with surprise that it was nearly half past six.

"I'll go for a walk," he said, "and be back to dinner in an hour. Will that be all right?"

"Game ball," Mr. Finnegan replied. "What would ye fancy? There's a very nice bit o' bacon on. Bacon and cabbage."

"That will do splendidly."

The resources of the little town were soon used up, and David, suddenly realising that he was tired, climbed out on a rock at the opposite end from McLaughlin's, and sat, watching the sea.

What would Alison say, if she could see him now? And Seton? How surprised they would be. They would approve, of course. They would look at each other with raised brows, and tell each other that their cure was beginning to work. His jaw took an ugly line: he did not like that thought. Oh well: what did it matter? Let them think

what they liked. It made them happy, and did him no harm.

Suddenly he saw Alison, in her garden, basket in hand, bending down over a flower bed, reaching across, one leg stretched out backwards. The perfection of her line, the momentary flush of her face from stooping, hit him with agonising sharpness. He caught his breath, got up, and began to clamber along the rocks: and his walk ended wretchedly, for he felt obliged to wait till half past seven before returning to the hotel. The only alleviation was a third visit to the chemist's, where he arranged for a bag of medical accessories for the next day, and bought a toothbrush and toothpaste.

The meal was not ready till close on eight. Nora served him, Mr. Finnegan explaining apologetically that the waiter was away. She showed a disposition to linger, and David would not have been sorry to talk. But Mr. Finnegan, evidently afraid that his guest would be annoyed, kept putting his head round the door and frowning at her. Each time he did this she smiled at David, till they were in a sort of conspiracy to humour the prejudices of the landlord.

When David had finished, Mr. Finnegan led him into his own back parlour. It was a dark little room. Nora brought in a lamp, smiled at David as usual, and went out.

"I have something to show ye here," Mr. Finnegan announced. "Something that will give ye a surprise. Did ye ever hear tell of Seager—Joseph Seager, the celebrated landscape painter?"

Good Lord, thought David, what now? "Yes," he replied. "I have heard of him."

"Are ye familiar with his artistic productions?"

"I have seen a few of them."

"Well, sir." Mr. Finnegan stood up, and waved a hand towards the wall. "Take a look at that. A fine example of the art of Joseph Seager at its finest."

With a sinking heart, David went over to the mottled wall. The shadow of the lampshade had hidden the picture. Mr. Finnegan picked up the lamp, and held it up for him to see.

David gasped, and with difficulty kept in a shout of laughter. The thing was the crudest of daubs, a picture of the harbour, the sea a lifeless smudge, the figure of a man fishing in the foreground all out of drawing, the perspective of the houses all anyhow. He looked round to see if it was a joke, but Mr. Finnegan was perfectly serious.

"There you are, sir. There you are. A masterpiece. Plus the signature, ye see. Plus the signature."

In a flash David envisaged scores of ludicrous forgeries, all up and down the coast, fruits of the boom in Seager's reputation. Some jobbing painter, going from hotel to hotel, taking advantage of the ignorance of the landlords, palming off these absurdities.

He stared at Mr. Finnegan.

"What do you think of it?" enquired the landlord.

"It's very remarkable."

A beam of gratification appeared on Mr. Finnegan's red face.

"I was certain ye'd admire it. Certain. I saw at once ye were a man of education. Tell me now"—his face became calculating and shrewd—"would there be a high value on that painting?"

"If it was genuine, it would be very valuable indeed."

"If?" Mr. Finnegan was shocked. "If it was genuine? My dear sir—do ye not see the signature?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm not casting doubt on it." The lie

was out before he could stop it. "All I mean is that it would be necessary to have it examined and valued by an expert."

Mr. Finnegan was relieved. "Ye mean," he said earnestly, "I should be careful to get the top price? Not to let it go without careful information of its value?"

"I mean exactly that."

"I see. Thank ye, sir. That is good advice, I see. I will take it. I will take it."

They sat down again, and chatted for a while. David ascertained that Mr. Finnegan knew the Brosnans—he described Owen as a stiff old lad—and, as soon as he decently could, he excused himself and went to bed, asking to be called at a quarter to eight.

He was very tired. The bed looked like a switchback, but this was due to the "three jars", vast stone hot water bottles so heavy he had to use both hands to lift them one by one to the floor.

The air from the window was soft and sweet. The harbour was quiet. David sighed thankfully, got into bed in his shirt, and in ten minutes was asleep.

## XIX

DAVID'S INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT calling him had no effect. He woke, looked at his watch, and saw that it was twenty to nine. Nora, when summoned, smiled amiably and said she was just about to call him. He dressed angrily, gulped down his breakfast—contrary to his expectations, it was very good—and hurried to McLaughlin's yard.

The proprietor received him courteously, but there was no sign of a boat. Pulling out his pipe, David sat down on a box to wait.

McLaughlin went away, and presently came back.

"Would you not like to wait inside, doctor?"

At any other time, David would have been tempted to see if the inside of the premises was furnished with anything resembling the variety of the yard: but he was all set upon his project. He thanked McLaughlin, and said he was very happy where he was. McLaughlin bowed, and left him.

David looked out across the wide stretch of water. It was a perfect morning. The sea was innocent and luminous. A crowd of gulls were squealing round something at the harbour mouth, and, every now and then, a fish leaped in the still water in front of him. It was so beautiful that by degrees he was lulled into an after-breakfast trance. For twenty minutes or so, he enjoyed the peace of the scene. Then he caught himself looking more and more often for the first sign of the boat. But the silken expanse was empty and serene.

As the minutes passed, his impatience increased. After an hour, he got up, and went in search of McLaughlin. McLaughlin was not to be seen, but a boy in overalls, whom David caught emerging from a little shed, went in search of him, and he presently appeared.

"When do you expect the boat?" David asked bluntly.

McLaughlin spread out his hands.

"She could have been here before this. It is a pity. If she does not come soon, there will be no time to fix her."

"Why? There's all the rest of today."

"No. Wednesday is half day."

"But, good Lord! I never heard such hide-bound, callous rot. In a case of emergency, when human life is at stake—you mean to tell me——"

David's indignation half choked him. The old man waited unmoved.

"It's a pity," he said sadly, "that the boat is not in earlier. You go back to your hotel, doctor," he added, in a kindly tone, as one humouring a child, "and I will send you word as soon as the boat comes. It will take forty minutes, from the time you first can see it."

"Thanks." David was glad to get away from him. "You'll send up, without fail?" he added, after he had gone a few steps.

"Never fear, doctor."

Once again David had been made to feel ill-bred. The violence of his own outburst had surprised him. Characteristic, he thought savagely, to funk a duty, to long for an excuse not to perform it, and then to rage when excuses were provided.

He went back, wrote a note to Sheila explaining his absence, arranged for its despatch, then bought a day-old



paper and sat firmly down to read it. He would not even allow himself to look at the sea.

Not until twenty-past twelve did the boy in overalls come to tell him that the boat was in. David hurried down, makeshift bag in hand, and found McLaughlin and an assistant working in leisurely manner at the engine. He looked round.

"Where are the men who brought the boat?"

"They're away."

"Why—how long has she been in?"

"A matter of forty-five minutes."

David went rigid with anger.

"You promised to send for me at once," he exclaimed.

"Ah, sure, doctor, where was the hurry? I could not have told you then what was wrong."

"I wanted to see the men, and ask them about going back."

"They could not tell you, till I had seen how long a job would it be."

David stood, struggling with the sense of a conspiracy.

"Well," he got out at last. "How long *will* it be?"

The old man looked up at him.

"It will be a long job. Many hours. But I have agreed to work extra time today, so that you can get away tomorrow morning."

For an instant David felt murderous. He longed to fling his bag in the bland, closed face. There was something up, he knew. They did not want him to go. Why? Spasm after spasm of rage shook him—the violent rage of a man whose nerves are overstrained. Even in its grip, he recognised it.

Easy, he said to himself. Easy. You have your patient to think of. Keep a tight hold. Don't let this old swine rattle you.

McLaughlin was making conversation difficult by hammering, damn him.

"There would be no possibility of getting away tonight?" David shouted.

McLaughlin stopped, and looked up again, courteously.

"I beg your pardon, doctor?"

David repeated his question.

"I doubt I will be finished before nine or ten o'clock, doctor."

"Listen, Mr. McLaughlin. Suppose half a dozen people were up there, in sore need of a doctor; maybe dying for want of attention."

"It is not to me you should put your arguments, doctor. It's to the engine."

He resumed his hammering.

"Couldn't we go tonight, when the engine is ready?" David yelled.

"That's not for me to say, doctor. You should ask the men who brought her."

"That's precisely why I wanted to see them. Where are they?"

"I could not tell where they are. They made away on a motor bicycle. And now, doctor, if I am to have this ready for you, I must get on with my work."

Fobbed off like a child, David said to himself furiously. He stood for a few seconds staring down at the industrious McLaughlin, then turned away and went back to the hotel.

Mr. Finnegan commiserated with him, but seemed firmly on the side of McLaughlin and the absentees. McLaughlin was terrible clever, he averred. If he said the job would take that long, that long it would take. At the idea of a start that night, he shook his head. The men would not be

back, he thought. Where had they gone? Sure, how could anyone tell that? They might be any place.

The more he talked, the surer David became that there was a conspiracy to stop him from going. He ate his lunch, made little response to Nora's smiles, and went and sat in the sun. What the devil was he to do all day? The one certainty was that he would not allow himself to be put off. He was going through with this now, come what might of it.

There was comfort in the decision, and in finding that he had the strength to make it.

He had sat half an hour when Mr. Finnegan came and offered to take him fishing. After a second's hesitation, David agreed: and they spent a pleasant enough time trolling for mackerel outside the harbour. They caught only half a dozen, but the afternoon was peaceful, and David was so far restored as to go along to a deserted spot and bathe before dinner.

When he returned, he found a note from McLaughlin saying that the men would be back first thing next morning, and asking him to be ready to start at eight o'clock.

Demanding this time to be called at half past six, and enlisting Finnegan's aid, he heard the landlord threaten Nora with terrible penalties should she fail, then turned in early and slept well.

He was called before seven, and, when he stepped down to the little slip at ten to eight, he felt in command of mind and body. The old boatbuilder greeted him indulgently, and introduced the two men who were to take him to his patient. Both were young, shy, and unshaven. It seemed to David that they would not meet his eyes, and his suspicions returned.

No time was wasted, and in five minutes they were well away. The morning was cloudy, translucent, and windless. The shapes of the mountains rose steeply, their shoulders soaring above the still water. David, after a couple of attempts at conversation, went up forward, and watched the tranquil gleaming sheet of water advance and split itself against the bow. Above the water line, the new bracken sprang pure green. Colours were intense in the soft sunless light: the strands of dry weed on a white beach to his right were like rusty iron. A cow, walking aimlessly along, nosing at the weed, lifted her muzzle and blared out at the boat. He watched her head and throat move, and, after an appreciable pause, the noise, at once blatant and mournful, came to him above the fussing of the engine.

The boat was ancient and peculiar. Some twenty-five feet long, she reached her maximum width about five feet from the stern, and rose high out of the water. Her engine was in the stern. The seating for passengers ran round the sides of the boat, meeting in the bows. It consisted of a single ledge, like a shelf, arranged so as to give the maximum of inconvenience. The edge of the gunwale, which projected inwards, caught David in the small of the back, obliging him to lean forward: and the shelf had been arranged at such a height that his legs dangled, like a child's in a railway carriage. David contrived at last to fix himself more or less comfortably in the angle of the bows, propped on his arms, his chest against the woodwork.

The two men had begun to talk. They spoke in Irish. He listened idly for a while, understanding nothing till he caught the English word "ignition". Evidently the vernacular was not adequate to deal with petrol engines.

Presently they entered a narrow sea-lough, with tall mountainous sides. The water was ominous with shadow.

Astern, the wake of the little busy boat spread fanwise, drawing its net over the silver stillness. David looked, and saw its edge reach the nearer shore, a little ridged disturbance running delicately along the sand.

The sheer height of the mountain above him was almost terrifying. He let his eye go up the slope, and saw, far, far above, small trees, like tiny green flames, against the sheer side. Their exquisite loneliness caught at his heart: he pictured himself up there, looking down at the little troublesome midget of a boat that buzzed along the silent sheet of water. He shut his eyes, and caught firm hold of the wooden side. Better belong to this small busy world, with its smell of oil and its companionship.

The lough opened, and another wider stretch of water broadened out of it. Looking across at the mountain that overhung it, David started in surprise. Surely he knew that cone shaped peak—different though it was, with an easy slope leading up to it on one side, an odd rosy colour in the strange light.

He turned to the men, and pointed.

"Isn't that Slieve Mor?"

"Yes, doctor. Yes."

"Why—then—we can't be so far from Kilree."

"It is over the other side, doctor. Just across the mountain."

Then I needn't have come this ridiculous long way at all, David thought, forgetting that, when he set out, he had no idea of making the journey.

"Can't one go round the island?"

"Ah no, doctor. It does be terrible rough. Ye have to come this way."

That's probable enough, David thought, sinking back against the hard wooden seat. He felt unreasonably cheered

to think that he was not far from Kilree, and his pleasure increased as the boat headed for the wider opening. After a while, however, it turned and made for a narrow entry which a small headland had hidden.

David stared at the water ahead, and by degrees he slipped into a dream. He was still sleepy, and ceased to notice time or place, till suddenly one of the men came forward and spoke to him.

"Doctor. The place where we are making for is over there." He pointed towards the head of the lough, still a mile distant. "We will land you on the rocks, as near as we can go. You can see the house there, above, by the field. You will have about an hour and a half to do your business. The boat with the mails comes down from Lough Faid, and passes there by that point at about twelve o'clock. Be there, and wave your hand, and it will take you back with it."

"But suppose I haven't finished?"

The man shrugged.

"You might be there a long time. Without you walked back: and that would take you many, many hours."

David stiffened.

"*Can* one walk? They never told me that."

"You could, if you were very strong and knew the country. But it would take ye the day and half the night. And you would need someone to show ye the way."

David grunted.

"Thank you," he said, after a pause. "I'll have to try and get through in the time." A fresh thought struck him. "Suppose I have to take the patient back with me? Will I be able to get him on the boat?"

"There will be people there will carry him over the rocks. It will be half tide. At low tide, it would be difficult."

He stood for a moment, then went back to his companion. David watched his destination approach him over the water. A white beach, with a few rocks to one side of it: a sparse field: a flat, insipid looking house, its small windows wide apart: a little hump of land beyond: and then the mountain. As they came nearer, he saw that there was more flat beach away to the left, a kind of delta between the mouths of two sea loughs. The land was riddled with them: he had never seen so many, fingering their way in, finding out every opening, every weakness. Then the engine switched off, and they approached the rocks.

It was easier getting ashore than he had expected. The two men brought the boat close to the rock, and he had only to step off. He turned, relieved, and thanked them. Their faces broke into smiles of surprising friendliness, and they wished him luck. He looked back, as he made his way up the beach, and saw that they were going away, their backs turned, as if he had never existed.

A sense of loneliness fell on him, seeming to drop from the mountains that shut the place in. It was all silent; not a stir; not even the cry of a gull. He stood, his mind clinging to the sound of the motor boat, alien and far from him now, yet his one link with the living world. Angrily he fixed his thoughts upon his patient, squared his shoulders, and walked up towards the house.

A chimney smoked faintly, but otherwise the house showed no sign of life. Coming closer, he saw a couple of white hens picking about near the door. A dog, shut up in an outhouse, suddenly set up a shrill hysterical barking. It was a young dog, David decided, and must be tied up. So strong was the sense of loneliness that he had an impulse to open the door of the outhouse, and speak to it. It would wag its tail and bound forward to reach him.

Then he thought of Kate's dogs, grimaced, and went on. Better leave well alone. He walked up to the front door, shifted his bag from the right hand to the left, and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again, and stepped over the threshold into a low-ceilinged, stone-walled room, sweet with the smell of turf. He looked about him, and started. A small girl of about nine was kneeling on the floor in front of the hearth, looking up at him without curiosity. She was dark, healthy looking, and dirty, and had fine gray eyes with long lashes. Before her was a doll, wrapped up in a napkin, and lying in a narrow cardboard box.

Before he had recovered from his surprise, she spoke.

"Were you wanting anyone?"

David pulled himself together, and smiled at her nervously.

"Does Mr. Aloysius Sheehy live here?" he enquired.

"He does not."

The flat negative staggered him.

"But—but they told me this was his house."

"It is, so."

"Well—where is he? I'm a doctor. I had a message to say that he was ill."

"He was ill. But he's dead." She jumped to her feet, took his sleeve, and led him outside the door. He saw that she limped. "Look. Do you see? They are taking him to bury him."

She pointed across the low-lying neck of land to the far side of the delta. There, on the broad white sands, about half a mile off, David saw a straggling black procession.

"Will you leave your bag, and go after them? There will be eating and drinking in that house there. Look—



you can just see the roof. Above the little green hump there. They will be glad to see you."

His mind working, David hardly took in what she was saying. He looked down at her.

"When did he die?"

"Yesterday. About ten o'clock. They are burying him today, because they have to work tomorrow."

Then I couldn't have got here, David thought.

"Was he all alone?" he asked. "Was there no one who could help him?"

"There was no doctor, but Father Morrissey came."

David jumped.

"Father Morrissey? Where did he come from?"

"From the town."

"What day did he come?"

"He came yesterday morning early."

So, said David to himself. I knew there was something wrong about it. How did he get here, if there was no boat for me?

He walked back into the room. The child followed, staring at him. He caught her eye, and reflected that his questions must seem very odd to her. He smiled, mechanically, and, forcing an interest, pointed to the doll.

"What are you doing with her?"

"I'm going to bury her. That's her shroud she is in, and her coffin." She looked at him again. "Will you not go over and join the men? There will be eating and drinking, and you will be very welcome."

"No, thank you. I'm afraid I wouldn't have time. You see, I have to go back by the boat with the mails."

She nodded, watching him gravely.

"There is not much in the house, but I will get you something. You must eat and drink before you go."

David stared. This was a most extraordinary child. She spoke like a grown woman.

"That's very kind of you," he said. "But you mustn't trouble. I'm not hungry yet."

"You must have something. It will be very early that you started, and you'll not be home for hours."

She limped away. A clock on the mantelpiece ticked fast and loud. On a table in the corner was an old gramophone with a tin horn painted to resemble an opening flower. The furniture was plain and old. David looked round apprehensively for another Seager, real or pretended; but there were only two pictures, one of the Sacred Heart, and an oleograph depicting ladies skating in the costume of the early nineteen-hundreds.

He heard a clink of china somewhere in the distance, and the child came back with a jug of milk and some scones. Feeling like a man in a dream, David sat at the table, and obediently took what she put before him. If she had bidden him tuck a napkin round his neck, he would have done it.

As soon as she saw him begin to eat, she dismissed him from her mind, and returned to her doll. Kneeling in front of it, she began chanting in a monotone. David noticed that it was in Irish. He wondered where she had learned her English: then he ceased to consider her, and ate methodically, pondering what he had just heard.

So the priest had got out, and yesterday morning. Whatever brought the priest could have brought him. So that was why they manufactured all the delay! That was why that old devil was so evasive. All right! There would be a few awkward questions asked as soon as he got back. Whatever was behind it, he would ferret it out. They should learn that medicine was not to be so slighted: so outraged.

David forgot that he had left his calling. He became so indignant he could hardly swallow. With an effort, he calmed himself, and munched purposefully. Now that the food was there, he was glad of it.

For a long time he sat, after his hunger was satisfied, staring out of the window, musing on what had happened and was happening. There was a lifetime between him and London. This world into which he had come was so strange, so unreasonable, that he felt nothing could surprise him now. The queer characters, the isolation, the note of sheer fantasy, against that background of wild and changeful beauty, almost numbed his mind. He saw how here one could forget time and purpose, could sink into a dream and be lost to all common urgency. He looked round the room, and tried to believe that he, David Heron, was experiencing this.

He closed his eyes, and opened them again. There they were, he and the child, intent on their own concerns, in the empty house, with no sound but an occasional strangled bark from the unseen dog. At last he roused himself.

"Well," he said, getting up, and brushing the crumbs from his lap, "thank you very much. Now I must go and wait for the boat."

She shook her hair back from her eyes.

"Have you had all you want?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And you feel better?"

"Yes. Much better."

He smiled, but her face remained grave. With abrupt decision, she scrambled to her feet.

"You have plenty of time for the boat. You can help me bury Josephine."

"Is that her name?"

"Yes. It is a very good name for her, isn't it?"

David inspected the blank face. Most of Josephine's complexion had been chipped away.

"Yes," he said. "I think it suits her very well."

"Would you know she was dead, to look at her?"

"To tell you the truth, I can't say I should."

"I can tell."

"You'd know best, of course."

"Yes. She's dead, and it's high time she was buried."

She picked up the box, and led the way out to the yard. Still in a dream, David picked up his bag, and followed.

"You're sure I've lots of time for the boat?"

"It will be around the point quite soon now. That leaves you ten minutes to get down to the landing-place. Don't be worrying. I will not let you lose it."

David satisfied himself that there was nothing in sight, then followed the child. The dog, hearing their voices, went off into a paroxysm of barking.

"Be quiet, Rory," she called: and added, "they had to shut him up. He is young, and he gets excited."

"Mayn't we let him out?"

She shook her head.

"No. I have no leave to do that."

"Where will you bury Josephine?"

"Down here, where I am going. In the corner. There is good soil there. Look—you dig the grave, while I say the prayers."

She's like Sheila, he thought, and felt a twinge of panic, lest it were a delusion, and the child did not exist at all. That might well be, in the state he was in; and in this queer lonely place. He looked at the child, and was reassured. She was not in the least like Sheila to look at. If he were

unhinged, he would have imagined her like Sheila to look at, he told himself.

He put down his bag.

"Where shall I get a spade?" he asked her.

"Here. Use this stone. It is very good. I buried a dead thrush with it the other day. A hawk got it. I drove the hawk off, but it was too late."

David squatted down, and began scooping away at the soft turf. It yielded, and he soon had a sizable hole. Behind him, he heard the monotone going on. Overcome with dislike for the game, he made a few last vigorous jabs, and stood up.

"There you are. That's big enough."

"Is it deep?"

She came and looked in.

"Yes. That will do. Thank you."

"Hullo. Isn't that my boat?"

She gave it the briefest of glances. "It is."

"I'm sorry I can't stay to cover her in," said David, picking up his bag. "Goodbye. And thank you for my lunch."

"Goodbye."

She was kneeling by the grave, and did not look at him.

"You will tell them I called, won't you?" he shouted, after he had gone some distance.

"Yes," she answered, still not looking up. "Goodbye."

David hurried down to the little rocky promontory. He was none too soon, for the boat, driven at a surprising pace, came careering down the lough. It was a steam boat, small, odd-shaped, with a disproportionately large funnel, set far astern, and at an angle out of all relation to the boat's design. The bows were upflung, and the whole course and cut of the vessel suggested irresponsibility.

Only one person was visible on board, a huge figure with a white beard, steering from a point just in front of the funnel. David, perched on the topmost rock, waved his hat. There was no response at first: then the figure waved back, there was a demoniac blast from the whistle, and the boat, with a sort of heroic violence, swung suddenly shorewards. Almost at once a head popped up forward, apparently in protest. The bearded figure waved an arm: the head turned, looked at David, and disappeared. Then, with a series of large manœuvres, the boat came sidling towards him: its final lunge being effected with such vigour that a wave was projected right up to David's feet, and he had to jump to avoid a wetting.

"Come aboard, sir, come aboard. Come aboard and welcome. Dennis, give the gentleman a hand."

The face reappeared forward. Dark and saturnine, and smeared with oil, it looked irresolutely at David. He gripped his bag, chose his moment, and sprang neatly aboard.

"Quite all right, thanks." Relieved, he grinned at the engineer, who smiled reluctantly, and withdrew. David felt his spirits bound upwards. He was glad to leave the place. "This is a very good deed on your part," he said, turning to the bearded man.

"Glad to do it, sir. Glad to do it. Though, mind ye," he added, glaring earnestly, "I'm no Christian."

Before David could reply, the bearded man let a hearty bellow, directed apparently to the engineer, and pulled twice at the whistle cord. The boat, restarting with a jerk which all but sent David off his feet, swerved away from the rocks, and rushed out to the open water.

Recovering himself, David studied his host. He was solid, nearly round, all of twenty stone, dressed in a double-

breasted reefer coat and wearing a blue peaked cap. His hair and beard were snow white, his cheeks smooth and ruddy, and his eyes a clear, light blue. The hands that held the wheel were red and shapeless, and, as he steered, he swung his body from side to side, like a fervent preacher leading his flock in song.

Suddenly the Captain turned his eyes to David.

"James M'Gonigal, of Dundrum," he bellowed. "Trade, master mariner. Age, sixty-seven years and five months."

David stared a second before he took his cue. "My name's David Heron," he replied. "I'm a doctor, and I'm spending a holiday at Kilree."

The Captain leaned over the wheel, and thrust out a huge paw.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, doctor. A learned man is always worth meeting. Particularly a scientific man. Now, *as* a scientific man——"

He leaned heavily, the wheel going round with his weight, and the boat swerved sharply for the shore. At once a wild cry arose from forward, and the engineer's head appeared in protest.

"Ay!" he shouted. "What the blazes——?"

Recovering himself, the Captain corrected the course, and stood silent, gulping. The upset to his equilibrium had disconcerted him. As if to cover it up, he frowned fiercely, and proceeded to steer parallel to the shore at a distance of less than a hundred and fifty yards.

After a silence, the Captain coughed, and spoke again.

"Yourself, sir, being, as I observed, a man of scientific training, accustomed to use the full compendium of mind and intellect, will be free from superstition. Wha'?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. That is to say, I hope——"

"Free from superstition." The Captain pointed at him. "Granted. I don't deny it. Good. Now—ye heard me, just now, proclaim me abhorrence of the superstition of Christianity. Or did ye not?"

"I gathered you were not a Christian, yes."

"In that case, I will not insult you by asking your own opinion. As a scientific man——"

The Captain let go with one hand, and executed a wide circular gesture, as if to symbolise the amplitude of untrammelled speculation; and David saw that he was nobly, magnificently drunk. He wondered why he had not seen it at once.

A protective, affectionate feeling rose in his breast. He wanted to laugh, in sheer revulsion of feeling. How good, how understandable, after the oddities he had been up against.

A finger was wagging severely in his face.

"I would have ye consider for a moment the Christian ideology. I would have ye bring the full faculties of your mind to bear upon it. What is the Christian ideology? Will I tell ye? 'Faith, hope, and charity.' Isn't that right? Wha'?"

He let go the wheel, and repeated "Faith, hope, and charity", ticking the words on his fingers. At once, as if alive, the boat headed inshore.

"I say," said David hesitantly, pointing to the rocks, "hadn't we better——"

Acknowledging the advice with a bow, the Captain caught the wheel, and swung the boat's head out again.

"Faith. Hope. Charity. Let us investigate them, one after one. Faith. Aye—but with qualifications, mind ye. With severe qualifications. I may have faith in the power of this boat to return to port. But for why? Wha'? Because



I know that me coadjutor forward will keep the engines running. If I experience a doubt, I have only to give him a hail, and faith will vanish into sight. HOY!"

The bellow was so shattering that David almost fell overboard. It fetched the engineer inside two seconds.

"It's all right." Captain M'Gonigal waved at him. "I was only illustrating a point to me learned friend the doctor here."

David smiled awkwardly, and the engineer, muttering, eyed his superior officer for a moment, and disappeared.

"Ye see me point. Insofar as I know the vessel, and trust in the professional skill of me coadjutor, me faith is justified. But—and here ye have it—beyond such point, it would be vainglory, lightheadedness, and superstition.

"So much for faith. What's next on the list? Hope. Hope? Hope?" He let go the wheel, and looked at David in large enquiry, like a Newfoundland dog expecting a biscuit: then shook his head, disappointed. "No. No, no. I see nothing to be said for hope. No justification at all. Surveying the visage of the world——"

"Ay!"

Once more, the engineer's head shot up, and David saw that they were heading straight inland.

"Looka," cried the engineer, "will one of ye for Jasus' sake hold on to the wheel, or we'll be on the rocks."

"Get down," retorted the Captain, seizing the wheel, "and mind your business." He swung the boat; she turned with a swoosh and rushed out for the middle of the lough. "Now: will that satisfy ye?"

"Don't be a fool," replied the engineer severely; and withdrew. Captain M'Gonigal kept her heading outward for a full minute, to show his independence of advice: then, by degrees, set her to the proper course.

"Hope," he resumed, "is disqualified. We have left Charity. What is to be said for Charity? Admirable in itself: but the Christian interpretation of it has no personal quality at all. Indeed"—his moustache began to bristle, and his colour to rise—"in the majority of cases, in the vast majority of cases, the correlation of terms in the expression 'Christian charity' is little short of a blasphemy. A blasphemy against charity." He blew hard for a minute, and his expression calmed. "As a scientific man," he said, "ye will doubtless endorse me strictures. Wha'?"

David temporised.

"Well," he said, "very often, I must say, I think the official Christian leaves something to be desired. As a doctor, I've seen a good deal——"

"Aye. As a *doctor*. Aye. You're right. That's the point."

The force of the comment escaped David. Before he could think of anything to say, the Captain went on,

"And what might ye be doing here?"

David told him. As he spoke, his indignation revived, and he related feelingly the difficulties he had met in making the journey.

"And yet," he concluded, "the priest was able to get to him all right, yesterday. Can you explain that?"

The Captain, who had been nodding with increasing vigour during the last part of the narrative, achieved a nod so portentous that his cap fell forward.

"I can explain it damn well," he said, pushing the cap back again. "So ye did not get to the poor sufferer in time? Aye. Begod. Humph. Aha. It was well for ye."

"What do you mean?"

"If ye had reached him, and saved him, ye would have been hounded from the district. Hounded, doctor. Hounded."

"But why on earth? By whom?"

The Captain crouched till his beard flowed over the spokes of the wheel.

"By the *priest!*" he hissed dramatically. "Aye. Ye may stare, in the innocence and goodness of your heart. But it's true. There was a doctor in it, and he was called out to a man was supposed to be dying. The priest had been, and given him the last rites for the dying: but the doctor saved him, and he did not die. The priest was rabid. Rabid, sir. He would not forgive it. He laid a persecution on the doctor. He told the people not to go near him, as they valued their lives and souls: and the doctor was forced to leave the district. Aye. It's easy to see why ye could not get a boat to take you to your patient, doctor. Be thankful ye could not. Aye."

He went on to say a lot more, but David, his mind in tumult, did not listen. So that was the explanation! The gross figure of the priest rose before his eyes: he recalled the man's domineering manner, his assumption of authority in another man's house, his roughness, his ill-hidden contempt. All David's English blood bubbled in revolt. So that ignorant, bullying clodhopper would boss him about, would he! Set those oafs to fool him, keep him away from his patient, even—David half choked at the thought—even let a man die sooner than be helped by an alien.

His rage was the stronger for the respect which he had unwillingly been giving the priest. In Kilree that forceful personality had been almost welcome. He saw it now as an incubus that kept the people under, that pushed them back into superstition so that it could remain master.

The boat, now steady on her course, cleared the end of the lough, and entered the broad stretch of water that led to the harbour. David heard the Captain's voice,

and heard his own mechanically replying to it; but, when he alighted on the quay, cordially thanking both captain and engineer, he had no recollection at all of what had been said.

The Captain wanted him to go off with him somewhere, and held him fast by the arm. David got away at last with promises to see him again, and left him staring after him, shaking his huge head in sorrow and disappointment. He was in no mood for the Captain now.

As he strode up towards Finnegan's hotel, he suddenly saw, ahead of him, the priest. For a second his stomach shrank as from icy water. He was too weak for a row.

Coward, he said to himself furiously: coward! At that moment Father Morrissey turned and saw him. He did not smile, but his round face assumed a milder expression. He raised a hand, took a couple of steps forward, then, characteristically, waited for David to come to him.

"Ah, Mr. Heron. I was looking for ye. I'm afraid ye had your journey for nothing."

David's jaws were clamped together.

"I did," he got out.

"I'd have got word to ye, if I'd known. Ye could do nothing."

"No one can do anything if he is kept away till the patient is dead."

"Even if ye'd got to him, ye could have done nothing for him, the poor man."

David glared. The priest seemed quite unconscious of his anger.

"Tell me, Father Morrissey. How was it that you got to the man yesterday morning, when no one would take me till today?"

The priest looked at him. His eyes suddenly opened,

then narrowed. An expression of contemptuous amusement rose in his face.

"So that's what's worrying ye?"

"It is."

"Well—I'll tell ye. A man came knocking at me presbytery window at three o'clock yesterday morning. I got up, and went with him. He was able to row me four miles to a certain place. I walked seven miles, borrowed a horse, and rode the rest of the way across the mountains. It's an easy journey by motor-boat," he went on, mercilessly watching the colour rise in David's face, "but hard by land."

David felt his knees go weak. Once more, as in the case of Peadar's cow, the tables had been turned on him; only this time far worse, with far greater shame.

As he stood dumb, Father Morrissey said, "Ye came back on the mail boat?"

David nodded. The priest smiled grimly.

"And you had, I will hazard, some conversation with the excellent Captain M'Gonigal?"

"I did."

"And told him your experience?"

"Yes."

The priest nodded.

"I thought as much. Hm." He eyed David. "It doesn't do to take everything Captain M'Gonigal says too seriously, Mr. Heron. He does not take an altogether impartial view."

"You mean, because he isn't a Christian?"

"I mean more than that. He once brought a court case against my predecessor here, on some fancied grievance; lost it; and, since then, his view of the priesthood has been a little biased."

David forced a sickly smile.

"I seem to have been making a pretty complete fool of myself. But look here. Perhaps you can explain this too." And he told the priest of the feeling he had had of a conspiracy to prevent him from starting.

"It was as if they deliberately came as late as they could on Wednesday, and got away before I could see them," he concluded.

"Of course they did. And of course McLaughlin abetted them."

"Then——"

"These men live and work out in that lonely spot, but their homes are here close by. When they get an excuse to come down, they always try to make it the weekend or the half-day, so as to have as long at home as possible. If it hadn't been for taking you, they wouldn't have gone back till this evening. You're a hard man to please, Mr. Heron. They put themselves out quite a lot for ye."

"But it wasn't for me. It was for that poor fellow out there."

"Hopeless."

"What?"

"Hopeless. They knew that. Nothing would have stood in the way, if there had been a chance. We have to be good neighbours to one another, in these out-of-the-way spots, or we couldn't live at all. We aren't the heartless savages you take us for."

"But the message. Why send for me at all, if there was no hope?"

"It was a chance message, sent independently by a neighbour. No, Mr. Heron, everything possible was done. Ask Moriarty, when he comes back from his holiday. He said, last time, the man couldn't survive another attack. But

ye must be tired, Mr. Heron. And famished. Come up with me now to Finnegan's, and have a bite."

"I had some food," said David absently: then he fell into step. "I am tired, though. I'd like to, very much."

The priest breathed loudly as he walked.

"It's going to turn soft," he said. "Ye did well to get back when ye did. That old heathen will have a slow passage with the mails."

"He nearly ran us on shore, as it was."

"Ah," said Father Morrissey tolerantly, "there's no harm in him. A decent enough man at heart. But a fool."

"It seems to me I'm the fool."

"Now don't start being sorry for yourself."

David turned to him in amazement.

"Yes, Mr. Heron. Ye were going to tell me that ye have not been well, that you are not quite yourself, and so nobody must be too hard on ye for making mistakes. We'll take it all as read."

David was silent. They approached the hotel.

"How you despise me," he said in a low voice.

The priest stopped and chirruped at a wandering dog. He turned.

"Ease up on yourself, Mr. Heron. Give our Island air a chance. Get your eyes used to a larger view." He leaned against the door, and David shrank instinctively, awaiting the mad jangle.

It burst out, filling the hall with rattling echoes.

"As a matter of fact," Father Morrissey went on, "—and I'm not saying this to sawder ye—ye put out of me head the one thing I wanted to say: and that was to thank ye, a man only just over a sickness, for your persistence in making a long journey to do what ye could for one of my parishioners. I appreciate that. FINNEGAN!" he roared,

and, picking up a tin tray, began to beat it on the marble ledge of the hatstand. "Is there no one in this place?"

A startled bark sounded, presumably from the spaniel. There was a shuffle, and Nora appeared, wiping soapsuds from her bare arm upon an apron of sacking. She greeted the priest, and smiled at David.

"It's dynamite is wanted to make anyone wake up in this place," said the priest. "Here's Mr. Heron, from the back of beyond, and starving. Get a move on ye, girl. Don't stand gawking there."

Nora beamed, and fled: and in twenty minutes David and Father Morrissey were sitting over chops and tea, the priest holding forth with great amiability about Kilree and its people.





## PART II



## I

IT WAS WITH deep relief that David returned to Kilree. As the priest had prophesied, a mist fell before he got there, drifting in soundlessly from the sea, so that he saw little on the journey. He had been unable to let anyone know that he was coming, and expected to find a cheerless house. But the fire was burning in his room, and the kitchen stove was glowing and purring to itself. A few minutes after the car had gone, Sheila came running across. She had been listening for him.

He did not want much, but he let her boil him a couple of eggs. He expected her to ask where he had been, but she showed no curiosity, simply accepting the fact that he was back. Piqued, he told her, under guise of asking if she knew anything about the dead man, and particularly about the child.

She had heard of Aloysius Sheehy, who, it seemed, had been ailing for years, but she knew nothing about the child. He described the conversation they had had, and how old the child seemed for her years. Sheila nodded.

"There are many like her," she said, "growing up in lonely places, with only the old people for company."

David looked at her, wondering whether he had been tactless: but it was never much good trying to find out what Sheila thought, for she did not seem to start from the prejudices and premises of ordinary people.

He yawned, discovered that he was very sleepy, and went up to bed.

When he woke next morning, after nine hours' solid sleep, the events of the previous days seemed a dream. Their distance lengthened as the day went on. In part, this may have been because he was anxious to forget them, for the whole episode had humiliated him; but the peace and isolation of Kilree closed like water over all that had happened before. Soon he could not believe that he had been away. Finnegan's Hotel and Captain M'Gonigal seemed as remote as London.

The value of the trip was that it had made Kilree seem actively desirable. In the days that followed, David devoted himself to piecing together more about the place and about the people.

He fished assiduously and with success, though the river wanted knowing; and he went for long walks. The more he explored, the more he realised how deceptive was the apparent simplicity of the landscape. Stretches which, in that huge setting, appeared almost featureless, he found to have an astonishing variety. What looked like an open stretch of moorland possessed all manner of hidden nooks and folds and hollows, full of bushes and tiny trees, and starred with flowers.

One place he avoided, and that was the beach where the whale still lay. He could see what remained of its bulk, covered with flocks of screaming gulls, and told himself that he was keeping away from the *stench*. In fact, he dreaded meeting the monk, in repugnance from a possible scene, and because he wanted no risk of further medical activity. The resuscitation of that had brought with it the old feeling of responsibility, and David was resisting it hard.

His information about the neighbours had come mostly from Father Morrissey, during their talk at Finnegan's,

and he now supplemented it by what he could extract from Sheila.

To his disappointment, he saw little of her, except when she brought him his meals. More than once he accused her of avoiding him. She replied that she was kept busy at the farm, and that Owen and John would complain, or do more than complain, if she were not there when they wanted her. The reason seemed sincere enough, but David suspected that Father Morrissey might have had some hand in her staying away. She could hardly be tied to the farm as fast as she pretended.

His suspicion was increased by finding her one day on the low cliffs at the end of the promontory. She seemed pleased to see him, and quite unconscious that her presence there did not fit with what she had told him. She showed him a favourite place of her own, a tiny grass-lined hollow in the rocks; but when he asked her how she had managed to get away, her answers were vague and uninterested.

Well, he thought, if she's keeping away, let her: and he told himself that he was a fool to worry about the vagaries of an ignorant girl.

All the same, she answered readily the questions he asked her about Kilree, and, with what Father Morrissey had told him, he was able to put together, among other things, the history of Peadar and old Kate.

Peadar's cottage did not really belong to him. It had been for a great many years in the possession of one family, and when they left, victims of the general depression which had cursed Kilree, no one seemed to know who owned the place. Peadar accordingly moved in and, with nobody to dispute it, held the cottage by right of possession, and had remained there, rent-free, ever since. He held with it the small neglected field in which it stood, and another

half-ruined place, three hundred yards away, which he used as a cow-byre. Part of the roof had fallen in, but the rest was sufficient to house a cow, and Peadar was well content with it.

The little field provided grazing, and Peadar would often come up to the byre on a fine afternoon and sit at the door, smoking his pipe and watching his cow. His seclusion was complete. A passer-by, going along the track, would not be able to see him, unless he called in first at the cottage, and, finding no one there, knew where to look.

The byre had one disadvantage. Between it and the cottage lay a stretch of bog. In the wet weather it was impossible to go across this bog without sinking over one's knees. This would have been nothing to Peadar in his young days, when he hardly knew whether he was wet or dry. He was a strong man then, even by island standards: but, as the years went on, a trouble fell which produced in him a childlike bewilderment. He refused to heed it at first, but by degrees it made him submit; and Peadar the strong found himself a victim to the pitiless pains of rheumatism, which first would shoot across his arm and shoulder, then begin to twist in and out of his knees, and by and by took such a grip of his back that there were days when he could not straighten himself at all.

Once, in the early days of the pains, he had been persuaded to make the journey to the harbour town and consult the doctor. It had been a wasted venture, and the cost of it still worried him. The doctor had asked how he expected to avoid rheumatism if he went out in the rain and let his clothes dry afterwards on his back. Peadar listened blankly, took the bottle of medicine, but forbore to ask the doctor how a man who owned only the one

suit of clothes could keep putting them off and on, and work at the same time. It was the custom to dry clothes by the warmth of the body, but sure, the doctor was a foreigner, and could not be expected to know anything about it.

Peadar went home, took his medicine, as long as it lasted, with a gravity and importance that roused great respect in his neighbours, and continued to stay out in the rain and let his sodden clothes steam in the heat of his body.

Before his rheumatism became really bad, Peadar had conceived the idea of building a road between his cottage and the byre, so as to avoid the uncomfortable plunges into the bog which he had hitherto accepted as part of the order of things. He began what would have been a noble achievement, and was remarkable anyhow: for he carried every stone by hand, stones which he had to search for and choose for their size, and laid them down on the uneven ground to form his path. In the softer places he had first to put down bracken and heather, and even little logs of wood, to prevent the stones from sinking in the mud.

The making of the road lasted over a number of years, and Peadar only stopped it when his back became too bad for him to carry the stones any longer. It was in the early stages of the task that his neighbour, Kate, began to develop strange habits which were offensive to him. From the time of the general exodus from Kilree, Peadar and Kate and the Brosnans, the only inhabitants left, had perforce become close friends. There was a rivalry between Kate and Elizabeth for Peadar's companionship, and he not at all disliking the position, divided his attention scrupulously between the two. He would visit Elizabeth one day, and Kate the next.



Of the two, Kate amused him more. She had a quick, witty tongue, and an imagination which would not be separated from her reason. Whether the odd stories which she told him were true or fancied, Peadar never knew, nor bothered to speculate. It was pleasant, it was sometimes even exciting, to sit of a summer evening at the door of her cabin and listen to her talk. As she worked herself up, she would tell him of places and people that appeared to her when she was out picking wood or cutting turf, or when she sat dreaming over her fire. Peadar would listen as an older child listens to a fairy-tale, knowing what it is at the back of his mind, but willing to suspend his disbelief. All the same, he knew perfectly well that Kate saw things that other folk did not. He remembered uncomfortably how she described the finding of the body of a Kilree man who was drowned, three days before it was actually picked up.

Elizabeth was a different sort of woman altogether. She was less gifted with her tongue, and not given to fancy. Her quality lay in her sharp commonsense, in her efficiency in practical things, and in the way in which she could see through and understand a person. Kate excited, Elizabeth reassured him. She was a friend to whom he could always turn, and her mood never changed from one of direct and open friendliness.

Peadar thought often how Seager had urged him, with a twinkle in his eye, to marry one of them, but he had shaken his head. And how right he had been, as he seldom failed to point out to Father Morrissey and others: for supposing he had chosen Kate?

Slowly and terribly in the last fifteen years Kate had changed. Perhaps the change had started even earlier than that, and had had to do with Mary Brosnan,

on whom the two older women had poured out their affection.

Mary preferred Elizabeth. Kate frightened her, and though, with her kindly nature, she tried not to show partiality, she could not altogether hide her aversion. As a result, Kate grew to hate her, and when the mother died, she transferred her hatred to the daughter. In every way she tried to alienate people from Sheila, inventing malicious tales about the girl, and carrying them to anyone who would listen, even to summer visitors.

As her malice grew, other unpleasant characteristics grew with it. She refused to clean out her cottage, she kept a dog chained up until one day it bit her when she went to let it loose. She let her appearance degenerate into that of a witch from one of her own imaginings.

The simple-minded Peadar was much put about by these developments. He began to avoid her, making excuses at first, and then, when she abused him for neglecting her, he showed open distaste for her person and her talk.

Kate took the obvious revenge of bringing her tongue to bear on him and Elizabeth. She slandered the two till Owen himself went up to remonstrate and, getting small satisfaction, sent Father Morrissey to her. The priest frightened her into silence for a while, but she broke out again, and in the end Owen had to set his manhood on one side and threaten her with his stick.

Silenced at last, she vented her malice in other ways, such as refusing to make use of Peadar's road. It ran for part of the way between his cottage and hers, and would have been a real convenience to her, but she made a great show of hobbling along by the side of it, and never allowed her feet to touch one of the stones

The old woman kept a sharp eye on Peadar's comings and goings. Enemies though they were now, the two were forced by sheer propinquity into an unwilling companionship. Now that she never cleaned out her cottage, Kate often found herself with nothing to do. If the weather were at all fine, she would spy on her neighbours, and Peadar, being so much the nearest, came in for the greatest share.

One morning, a few days after David's surprise meeting with the priest, Kate, peering out from her doorway, saw Peadar go past on his way to the byre. Giving him a good start, she took up her crutch and hopped along behind him. It was his habit to go in and hold long conversations with his cow, Martha, to which Kate would listen in malicious glee, repeating in mockery all he said, and adding obscenities of her own. There was the excitement, too, of hopping away before he came out, so that, when he saw her, she was far enough from the byre to be within her rights, and to be free from question.

Accordingly, as soon as he had disappeared into the doorway, she came as close as she could, her filthy old face screwed into an expression of mad attentiveness.

Coming within earshot, she stiffened and stood almost erect with surprise. Instead of the usual uxorious cooing, the soothing love-talk which the old man addressed to his favourite, she heard groans of dismay and lamentation. After a few seconds of immobility, she made spider-wise for the doorway. There was a sound within, and Peadar appeared, his eyes blank with grief. So overcome was he that he did not question her presence.

Kate uttered a cackle of feigned dismay.

"What ails ye?" she cried in shrill surprise.

"Martha." The old man was speaking slowly, as if

someone had hit him on the head. "Martha. She is sick again."

"What? After the priest been to her, and laid a blessing on her?"

Kate's voice bubbled with satisfaction. She had never forgiven that visit of reproof.

Peadar looked at her miserably.

"She was better, much better, after it," he said. "But now she is worse than ever."

"My poor man, my poor man," cackled Kate in delight. "What will you do, what will you do at all?"

"I don't know, unless——"

He broke off and swallowed. Kate pounced.

"Unless what?"

"Unless—that man——"

He pointed vaguely in the direction of the farm. Kate uttered a screech.

"That man! Him that put a curse on the whole place, and called up a pack of weasels to destroy John! Him that will be ruining Sheila and bewitching every one of us!"

"Father Morrissey said—if she should be sick again—to call him. It's the way he is a doctor."

Kate's face shrivelled into a mask of pure spite. It gathered in wrinkles round her beak of a nose, as if someone had drawn tight the neck of a sponge-bag around a projecting object.

"I am thinking," she said at last, "it is that man has done it."

He looked at her like a bewildered child.

"Father Morrissey said to fetch him," he repeated. Then, as if in duty bound to defend the priest, "She was bit by a snake."

Kate suddenly became very angry.

"And how do you expect the cow to thrive if you let her wander every place amidst the rocks? What way is that to be caring for the poor animal?"

Peadar shook his head, as if to shake away these distractions from the idea to which he clung.

"Father Morrissey said to fetch him," he muttered.

Kate gave a hop as if something sharp had stuck into her.

"I will fetch him. Let you stay here and keep company with Martha, and I will bring him to you."

His face brightened, then fell again.

"There's no knowing where he would be. He goes away walking, or fishing every day, when the weather is fine."

"I didn't see him pass," Kate said. "I think it's at the farm he must be. Anyway, there is John Brosnan working in the west field. Maybe he will know where he has gone. Stay where you are now," she commanded sharply, "I can go quicker than you."

She sped off at once, uncannily agile, across the bog. Even in this extremity of haste she avoided Peadar's causeway. Once on the track, she went at a great pace, swinging along upon her crutch, cackling to herself, overjoyed to be the bearer of ill tidings. Some twelve minutes of rapid hobbling brought her within range of John, but, to her annoyance, she was too breathless to hail him, and had to lean against the stone wall and wave her crutch for some time before she attracted his attention.

He came down slowly and reluctantly, his narrow face full of suspicion. He disliked Kate as heartily as she disliked him, and never bothered to conceal the fact.

The old woman gasped out her message, and peremptorily ordered him to go to the farm.

"There is no time to be lost," she said. "I am going back now to the river to see if he is fishing there. One way or another, we must get him."

Without a word, John turned and made for the farm, and Kate went back the way she had come. So strong was the bond of common necessity that, despite the malice of her nature, it never occurred to her not to make efforts to save the cow. As in all such isolated districts, these people were forced to co-operate if they were going to survive at all. One might hate a neighbour, but one helped him save his crops or goods, just as one would feed him if either failed.

John went towards the cottage as if it might explode. He would not face the front door, but went into the kitchen. Sheila, who was preparing a meal, started back at his appearance, and instantly got on the far side of the table. She did not speak, but watched him with startled eyes.

John did not speak at once, either. He looked around vaguely, then turned his expressionless gaze upon the girl.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"What's that to you?"

"He is wanted above. Peadar's cow is sick. Kate says she was bitten by a snake." This was a long speech for John.

Sheila stared at him, her mouth opening. Knowing John's opinion of David, she was dumbfounded.

John scowled.

"Father Morrissey told Peadar to fetch him. He said he was a doctor."

Sheila slowly let out her breath.

"He is not here," she said. "He's gone fishing."

John's expression did not change. He nodded.

"He is above by the bridge. You had better go and tell him."

John shook his head. His eyes were straying round the kitchen, with a lack-lustre slowness which veiled his curiosity. Sheila stamped her foot. Fear of him made her angry.

"Go on, go and tell him at once, don't stand gaping there."

He looked at her with colourless dislike.

"Kate is gone," he said.

"If you knew where he was, why did you come here?"

"I did not know. Kate sent me here in case."

"Well," said Sheila, loudly, "Mr. Heron is not here, so you can go away out of this, and leave me to get on with my work."

And, turning her back on him, she went over and clattered the oven door. She was shaking, but the bravado worked. John looked at her indecisively for a few seconds, then turned and shuffled away. He would find Owen, and they would go and see what was happening.

Sheila, left to herself, hesitated, inspected what was in the oven, decided it would do for a while, and went out. Giving John time to get well ahead, she started off. Then she saw he was going to find Owen. Cutting down to the shore, she ran along, under cover of the little hillocks, so as to reach Peadar's byre ahead of them both.

Not long after Sheila had left the farm, old Kate came upon David. He was fishing in his favourite place, close to the bridge. She came on him as he was in the act of flinging a half pound trout back into the water, and breathlessly bade him accompany her.

He could make little of her explanation, for, what with breathlessness and excitement, it reached him as a gabble: but he could grasp its drift. He felt a flame of secret pleasure at the thought that he was needed and sought out by these unfriendly people. He disjoined his rod, Kate flapping

about with impatience like a wounded rook: put the rod up, and followed her.

Kate led the way towards her own cottage, then plunged inland. She reached Peadar's path, and avoided it carefully as ever. Looking ahead, David saw Owen and John outside the byre, standing by Peadar, who sat with his head between his hands.

As Kate and David approached, Peadar rose, and went into the byre.

By the time David reached the byre, he could hear the old man's voice, murmuring sad encouragements to poor Martha. Then he appeared in the doorway, holding her by the horn. With difficulty he persuaded her to come out into the light, where she stood, a picture of passive despair. Her coat was harsh and staring, her breath laboured. She shivered, her legs far apart, her head drooping.

All watched her, but no one moved. David put down his rod and went to the cow. One look, one touch of his hand on her flank, and he knew what he must do. He stepped back and felt in his pocket, but withdrew his hand with an exclamation of impatience.

"I have no knife with me. I shall have to go' back to the house."

He looked at John and Owen. Their faces were blank. No one, it seemed, had a pocket-knife. As he started to walk away, Sheila appeared from round the corner of the byre.

She raised her face with an expression of utter confidence.

"I will get it for you. I run very quickly."

He hesitated, and was seized with sudden anger against the men. They stood like oafs, waiting to see what he would do, refusing to commit themselves. He nodded to Sheila, telling her where to find the knife. She started off at once.



The cow swayed on her feet, and David looked at her in alarm. He called sharply to Sheila, and she pulled up, her mouth open.

"There isn't time. I must do it at once."

He turned to Peadar. "Surely you have a knife in your cottage, man?"

Peadar looked at him dully.

"Yes, yes, I have a knife, but I doubt it is sharp."

"It will have to do. Where is it?"

"It is in the drawer of my little dresser."

David wheeled round to Sheila.

"Run quick, there's a good girl."

She was off in a flash. Standing waiting for her, David became violently aware of two things. One was that these people who stood around him were completely hostile. With the exception of Peadar, they hoped that he would fail. The second, and this trickled over him like cold water, was that the delay was even more harmful to him than to the suffering animal. Already the familiar symptoms were clawing at him. That bursting flank into which he must plunge his knife was a leering monstrosity, the object of all his fears.

He moistened his lips with his tongue, and looked out to sea. It was calm, clear and gray. The horizon was a dark line drawn to cut sea from sky. In sheer despair, he turned to Owen and tried to engage him in conversation. Owen acknowledged the effort with chilly courtesy, but his unwillingness was like a stone wall between them. With an attempt to seem casual, David walked over to the cow. He patted her back, and spoke to her. She took no notice of him, but swung her head like a pendulum. He felt their eyes boring into his back, and looked round to meet Peadar's unblinking stare, in which hatred fought with hope.

David squared his shoulders. Pay no heed to them, he adjured himself. Stick in the knife, and do your job. It will be over in a moment.

Sheila had appeared again. She was running swiftly. As soon as she saw him looking at her, she waved the knife. Swallowing, he went to meet her and took it from her hand.

"Thanks."

He tried to smile, but his hand was trembling. He pulled up his sleeve and went over to the cow, cursing himself, fighting hard to steady his hand. He shut his eyes for a moment, to control the nausea that was swirling up in him. Then, just as he was nerving himself to plunge in the knife, he felt a hand clutch at his arm, and turned to see Peadar beside him.

The old man's eyes were blazing, and he was violently shaking his head.

David made a gesture of impatience and pointed to the cow's left flank.

"Look for yourself," he said coldly: but his voice was unsteady. "There's excessive fermentation there. I'm merely going to lance it, and she'll be quite all right."

He disengaged his arm, and again turned to the cow; but Peadar once more seized hold, and forcibly took the knife from his fingers. Again he shook his head, though his lips remained tightly closed.

A cowardly feeling of relief came over David. With the last of his self-respect, he fought against it.

"Do you want my help, or do you not? If I don't lance this swelling, your cow will die, and die in great pain. Which is it to be?"

Why are you asking, he said to himself savagely. Grab the knife, shove the old fellow away, stick it in.

"Which is it to be?" he repeated.

Still shaking his head, Peadar put the knife away in his breeches pocket.

"Very well then. On your head be it."

He turned and strode away, passing the others without looking at them.

## II

AFTER DAVID HAD gone, the men gathered round the cow, and Sheila was able to slip off unobserved. She judged it prudent to give David a good start, and then made her way back to the cottage to get him his meal.

Curiosity was too strong for her when she arrived and saw the front door closed. She crept round to the window, and looked in. He was sitting in his armchair, his hands resting limply on the arms.

Before she had realised her own intention, she was raising the bottom of the window.

"Would it anger you if I came in?"

He did not answer, and she repeated the question. A second or so after she had spoken, he raised his head and looked at her. She was startled by his face. He did not seem to see her.

"Are you ill? You are looking queerly."

Without waiting for an answer, she darted through the front door, and a moment later was inside the room. Only once before had she seen that look on anyone's face. That was on Mary's face, the woman who used to teach her, who used to fall down sometimes and kick and scream.

David looked round as she came in. He spoke in a flat, hard voice.

"What do you want?"

"I am coming to get your meal. It's long past the time."

"I don't want anything."

He leaned his head on his hand. There was a silence, in which she stood considering him. At last he said, in a voice so low she could hardly catch the words,

"The cow. What's happening?"

"Nothing."

Sheila was surprised. His question seemed irrelevant; she had almost forgotten the cow.

"Peadar has ill luck with his cows," she said. "He is very fond of Martha. She is the only one he has left. One time he had four."

She paused, for she did not know whether he was listening. Looking at the line of his arm and hand, she asked interestedly, "Could you have taken away the bite if Peadar had let you?"

He looked up.

"The bite?"

"The bite in the cow. John said she was bitten by a snake."

David sat up.

"What *are* you talking about? That cow was not bitten by a snake. She is suffering from tympanites. A perfectly straightforward case, if only I . . ."

He broke off. A moment later he asked,

"What on earth made you think it was a snake-bite? I thought there were no snakes in Ireland. Didn't your precious St. Patrick chase them all away?"

She coloured.

"They say that snakes come out of the sea, and bite the cows. Peadar was foolish to let Martha stray."

"What utter nonsense. The probability is his other cows all died of the same thing."

"He said they were bitten."

She stood, quiet but stubborn. How obstinate these

people are, he thought; dogged; impossible to teach. Suddenly he realised a possible reason for the snake theory. Father Morrissey had blessed the cow, and they would not like to admit to an outsider that his magic had failed.

He looked at Sheila, intending to say something sarcastic, but his eyes, meeting hers, were suddenly held. Hers were glowing with a light which caught him unawares and drew an answering flame from him. A shock tingled through him; his heart leaped.

"Well," he said lightly, "I'll give you and your precious uncles a hundred pounds for every snake that bites a cow, and be none the poorer after ten years."

Her head lifted eagerly. "Are you going to stay here ten years?"

"I haven't the least idea."

Sheila was not deceived. She stood silent, drinking in as if through every pore the knowledge that this man was her friend. His eyes said so. She knew it, even though there were times when, from the way he spoke, she might be his most deadly enemy.

"What were you going to do to the cow?" she asked, and regretted the words at once, for the light went out of his face. His eyes veiled themselves, and he spoke harshly.

"The correct treatment would have been to stick a knife in below the swelling and let out the gas." He paused, and his face twisted bitterly. "Only—I didn't do it."

The self-contempt in his voice stung her. She clasped her hands, and her words tumbled out.

"You could not. Peadar would not let you. He held you back. I saw him holding on to your arm."

"Did you see me explaining to him? Did you hear me trying to make him understand?"

The appeal was almost a shout, and she took an involuntary step backwards. Then his face twisted again, and his voice dropped.

"I didn't do it because I didn't want to do it. I hid behind the etiquette that one must not operate without the patient's or the owner's consent. I could easily have persuaded that old fool."

"Indeed, then, you could not," she retorted with spirit. "We can none of us change Peadar if he has made up his mind."

"I could have knocked him down."

"The others would have been on you if you had. Owen is very strong."

"Don't try to make excuses for me. I funk'd sticking a knife into the poor beast. Yet it was a job that a child could do."

He let himself go limp in the chair. Sheila stood very still. Then she crept out of the room, and returned with a tray and a glass. She laid them by his side without a word, went to the cupboard, took out a bottle, placed it also on the tray, and then retired to the kitchen, leaving both doors open.

Listening acutely, she heard him pour out a drink. She tiptoed to the oven and began to prepare the meal.

Five minutes passed, and then he called her.

"Sheila."

It was the first time he had used her name, and she caught her breath. Before she could go to him, he came down the passage. "Sheila. I didn't mean to drive you away."

She wished she were a woman who knew about people, not a country girl. She plucked the apron at her waist, and her neck moved like a bird's, alert to things she could not understand.

He turned and went back to the room, and she knew she was to follow. She followed him slowly, afraid for the first time in her life: not of him, but of something she could feel as she could feel approaching thunder.

He stood at the door, holding it open for her to go in. She summoned all her courage to pass him, and crossed to the fireplace. He closed the door slowly and stood with his hand on the knob, his attitude suggesting that already he repented of calling her.

Presently he came over, and with a mechanical gesture, offered her a cigarette. She drew back with such surprise that he smiled at his own forgetfulness. She returned the smile frankly, and they were both at their ease.

"I have never smoked anything. Kate and Elizabeth smoke pipes sometimes. I don't understand why people smoke at all. Do you like the taste of it?"

Glad that the strain had relaxed, David considered his answer.

"If a smoker is a connoisseur of tobaccos, I'm not a smoker at all. I dislike strong, coarse brands: otherwise I can smoke anything. No," he wrinkled his forehead. "With me, it's the actual drawing in and expelling of the smoke which I like. There is a rhythm about it which soothes me, particularly when I am disturbed. But it would have been all the same if I smoked tea-leaves or blotting-paper."

"Peadar is not like that. He likes three or four pipefuls a day of the strongest tobacco he can get."

David's face clouded, and Sheila, instantly taking up his mood, felt a load on her back, pressing her down. She had said something that touched a sore spot. It was like the tooth the travelling dentist had pulled for her last year. It had stabbed her with sudden pain whenever she



had touched the inside of it with her tongue, but she had forgotten it in between times.

Looking at David, she had the impulse to go over to him and put her hand on his, but she knew with absolute certainty that this was not a man to approach simply, to comfort as she would comfort Donough. He would whip at her with his tongue, if she came too near him, just like a cat which she had tried to stroke when she was little, which suddenly spat and whipped at her with its claws.

"I think I had better go," she said steadily. "You like to be alone."

He turned.

"Can't you bear even to be in the same room with me?"

Her eyes widened so with reproach that he had to look away.

"I must talk to someone," he muttered. "I never wanted to speak to a living soul again, but now . . ."

He thrust his hands into his pockets, kicked the waste-paper basket under the table, took an irresolute step or two, and flung himself into his chair. Sheila seated herself quietly, folding her hands in her lap like an old-fashioned child.

"It's ridiculous, it's contemptible. I am old enough to be your father." He turned his head suddenly. "Have you ever felt you must talk to someone?"

Sheila nodded several times.

Of course she had. That was what Donough was for. She could see him now, lying at full length on the grass, chewing a stalk and listening to her childish outpourings. He was interested always, but he was wholly imperturbable. When she talked to him, or rather talked so that he could hear, her trouble would presently float away.

This man was talking now, and she had to listen. But could she carry out Donough's part? It was so much more difficult than the talking.

" . . . that wretched animal . . . it's probably dead by now, because I am such a blasted coward. Because I tried to save myself a little pain. Oh yes, I could have done it, but I was glad to escape. I was delighted when that old maniac held my arm. I can't understand it. It was to cure myself of that—that ridiculous squeamishness that I studied medicine. I knew I should have to hide it at hospital, and I did. But that didn't cure it."

He looked at Sheila, and drew back his lips in a thin smile.

"You were wiser than you knew when you brought me that stuff." He jerked a thumb towards the empty glass. "I took that to try and cure myself. But it's no good, you know."

He stopped, breathing hard. Sheila marvelled how difficult it was for him to speak. He sounded as if he were tied up in knots. Donough spoke as easily as he breathed.

White-faced, gripping the chair, David forced himself on.

"I—my difficulty is that I can identify myself with people—people whom I can't face. People in pain. People who despise me. I become the other person, do you see? And I can only see through his eyes. I feel his pain, or I feel his contempt for me. It's so . . . so *unsound*. I have always known that. I used to say to myself, when a casualty was brought into the ward, 'Poor devil, he's so far knocked out that he has only half his senses left. He's conscious only of his physical pain, he doesn't care what he looks like, what sort of figure he's cutting, or what his wife is feeling.' But I do, you see." His voice rose dangerously. "I picture my

own feelings when I see the smash coming. I see myself all smashed up and bleeding, then I run away from that and become my own wife, waiting anxiously for news, and then on and on to everybody else who is concerned. That's why I had to stop. It made me so sick and tired and upset that I couldn't mend the chap up properly. I couldn't do anything. I was no good, a traitor to my profession, a traitor to myself, a traitor to everybody who relied on me."

He sprang up and began pacing up and down the room. Sheila twisted her fingers, glanced round, and moved his glass to a safe place.

She put off speaking so long as she dared, but he remained silent.

"You must be . . ." she began, then made a new start. "Did you not get used to it at all? I mean, if you saw so many hurt people, you could not feel sorry for all of them."

"Oh, don't make any mistake," he said cruelly. "Don't suppose for one moment that I am a nice, sympathetic, sensitive person. Not a bit of it. This is funk, sheer funk. Panic. Something I have never faced, can't bear, can't stand up to."

He came close to her, and she shivered, unable to shake the weight of his pain from her. He was standing over her. She felt him like a thunder-cloud, but she dared not look up in his face.

"I am a moral and physical coward. I am afraid of every blessed thing—even Kate's dogs."

The clock, chiming on a high absurd note, broke the tension.

Both breathed out, and were glad. Sheila realised that her nails had been biting into her palms. David's whole body loosened, and when he spoke again, it was the voice of a different man, someone young, persuasive, eager to

make her understand. He seemed to have forgotten that he had been speaking of himself.

"The odd thing," he said half-laughing, "is that, so far from getting away from those things that I am afraid of, I cling to them like a limpet. I forced myself to be a doctor. I'm like a man who insists on climbing mountains, even though he knows the least height makes him giddy. In a sort of way, I married Alison because . . ."

He clutched hold of the mantelpiece, and bent down, staring with profound perplexity into her face. His tension had entirely gone: he spoke without effort.

"Sheila: I have never told this to anyone before. It seems so silly, now that I put it into words. *Why* do I make myself do the things I am bad at? I can do lots of things. I can play the piano, and read and talk, and I expect there are several jobs I could do, jobs of another kind. There are other men like me, I know that now. I have met them, most of them easy-going chaps who stick to their books and their fishing, and sail model yachts. But when I was at school, I thought everybody belonged to the other kind. Why did I have to join the wrong camp? Why do I still want to be in it?"

She shook her head. She felt inadequate, she in her washed-out ragged frock, with her hair done so differently from the visitors who came in the summer. What must he think of her? Why did she ever imagine she could talk to him? She was all wrong, she could say nothing. She was fit only for the kitchen.

But David, considering her with a kind of wonder, knew that she had a quality he had never met before. She did not challenge him, either by her looks or in her words. He had no need to protect himself. More than that, she made it as easy for him to talk as if he were talking to himself.

Easier even: for she was a listener with no scorn, and her presence and her readiness to receive removed the shame he would have felt if he had been speaking only to himself.

He was grateful. He needed to express his gratitude in the same simple way in which she gave him her sympathy. He moved over and sat beside her on the sofa, and took her hand.

"It is only lately I have begun to understand. Coming to this place—and you, have helped. Yes, you have. Before that, I just went on trying to be the sort of man Seton Masterman is. It was so damned silly. It made every little bit of life intensely hard work, like all the time swimming upstream. Then I began to see that he did all his things without any effort at all—his work, his hobbies, the way he makes friends with people. I mean, I've been giving him credit for what he couldn't help doing. I began to criticise him then, and now, I'm pulling away from him and from everything he stands for."

He stared at her, his eyes wide, his brow furrowed.

"You've done something to me," he said wonderingly, "all of you here. I don't understand you, I'm an outsider, I'm at cross-purposes with you—not with *you*," he amended. "And yet, you've all got hold of me, or the place has, and I see things more clearly. But—where am I going to? I feel as if there was another self dragging me back to when I was young. I don't want that, because I was such a fool, silly, unformed: and there were horrible things that I don't want to think of, things I have forgotten on purpose."

She flinched involuntarily; he was hurting her hand. His grip eased.

"But there are other things, and when I remember them I realise I was much more alive then."

Sheila shifted on the sofa. Her left leg was going to sleep, but she dared not move, lest she should break his mood. It was late: they would be looking for her: she had not done her work. Then, with absolute certainty of intuition, she knew that this was more important. This man was her friend, needing her. She relaxed, and shut her eyes.

He was stroking her hand slowly, but it seemed to her that he did not know it was there. She looked into his face.

"What sort of things do you remember?" she ventured, and was rewarded by seeing him smile. It was his first real smile; it made him seem much, much younger.

"Oh, silly things. Once, when I was staying in Scotland with my mother—she came from the Highlands—we were out walking, and we went farther than we meant to. She could never remember the time. We got cut off by the tide in an estuary, and she was so excited! We took off our clothes and made them into a bundle, and she tied them on her head, and we swam across, and ran about up and down the sands till we were dry. My mother sang. I loved it, except that I was terrified someone would see us."

"What else did she do?"

"Another day"—he paused, and seemed to be thinking—"we found an old church, far away from everywhere. She said she simply must play the organ. I was terrified she would get caught, and I looked everywhere, in all the corners, to see if anyone were there. I had to blow for her. She played beautifully. I had to listen to her, I couldn't help it, but I was listening too, all the time, in agony, in case anyone should come. I think I was afraid we should be put in prison. You see, she didn't care what she did, and I felt responsible to Father for her."

"Another night"—he raised his head and smiled again—"we were in a boat, and she was rowing. She rowed

straight at a flock of gulls. They rose upward in a great white cloud. I remember how she cried out with joy, but I scolded her and said she should not have done it. She might have hurt one of them."

"No," said Sheila with decision. "Gulls always get out of the way. I would like to have heard her sing," she added half-sadly. "I can't sing at all, but Donough can." She gave a wriggle. "I swam once that way too. I would like to do more things like that: the sort of things your mother did."

"Would you?" he frowned. "She was terribly thoughtless, and she did a lot of silly things."

"I don't think those things silly."

David looked at her doubtfully. "They were, when you come to think of them."

Sheila wriggled again, and said irrelevantly, "Did *your* father go away and lose you?"

He jumped.

"Of course not! What makes you say that?"

He saw her eyes darken, and went on, less harshly, "He was very busy, he hadn't time for anything much except his work. He was a fine man, and everyone looked up to him. I'm not much of a credit to him. He was unlucky with his family. First my mother, and then me." His voice hardened. "My mother was thoroughly selfish. She spoiled his life for him."

He released her hand, and lit a cigarette. Sheila looked at him sideways.

"If you like things like the sea and birds and music, why did you make yourself into a doctor?"

His wrist jerked as if he were going to throw the cigarette into the fire.

"I've told you. It's a useful and practical profession.

I was a dreamy and very unpractical boy. I thought it might lick me into shape."

"And now that you don't like it, you will stay here with us? And write and fish and go for walks?"

"If I do stay here, it certainly won't be as a doctor. I gave up doctoring some time ago. Besides, most of you are a little mad, and I don't fancy mad people, particularly as patients."

He smiled as he spoke, and Sheila, relieved, smiled back.

"I seem to have been unburdening myself at some length." He tried to hide his self-consciousness. "It's your turn now. Tell me the story of your life."

She looked up quite gravely.

"I think you know all about it. It isn't much anyhow."

He was disconcerted by her simplicity, not for the first time. Before he could decide what to say, there was a knocking sound. It was vague and muffled, and David was not quite sure that he heard it. He cocked his head enquiringly, and Sheila sprang up.

"It's at the kitchen door."

"No, wait, I'll go."

He went out of the room, and Sheila, standing at the open door, heard his voice in the kitchen, followed by a low mumble. She could not distinguish the words. She stepped back into the room, and quite suddenly a tide of feeling rose in her. It was as if, in David Heron's presence, she had tightened herself so that she could not feel, and, now that she was alone in the room, every sense was aware, not only of the man who had just left it, but of the room. With no attempt to resist the impulse, she moved inquisitively round, peeping at the writing-table, at the books, lifting a paper here, a book there, almost as if she were an animal hunting for a scent.



David, returning, found her staring at an envelope on the mantelpiece. She jumped away quickly, and he frowned.

"That was one of your precious uncles," he said.

She contracted in herself. "Which one?"

"John. He says the cow is worse, and Peadar is beside himself. Wants me to go down again. Well—I won't. I've told him what to do, and he can do it himself if he wants to." His voice changed. "I'd like to go in a way, but that's weakness. Snatching at a chance to retrieve something which I funk'd once for all."

Sheila was not listening. "Does John know I am here?" she enquired anxiously.

"Know you are here? I don't know, I am sure. I didn't tell him."

Sheila made a small movement with her shoulders and arms.

"I don't like that fellow," David went on. "He doesn't like me either. He has a stupid, suspicious look in his eyes. I was thinking of him as much as of that old witch and Peadar, when I said you were all mad down here."

"I don't like John," said Sheila. "He hates me. I know he does, and yet . . ."

She was blushing.

"And what?" he asked.

The blood flooded to her face and neck. "He is after me," she said, looking away from David. "He tried to get me alone. I told him I would tell Owen, but——" She looked this way and that, seeking escape from the subject into which she had plunged. "Besides," she said, "he is jealous of my pictures. He has heard that they are worth money."

"Oh yes." David balanced one leg on the edge of the sofa. "I wanted to talk to you about them. I don't think

that you, any of you, realise how much they may be worth."

Sheila did not answer. She looked down at her wet, broken, canvas shoes, and began to move about the room, fidgeting, as if she wished to say something but could not get it out. At the window she paused, and, with her back to David, asked,

"Do you know anything about him?"

"About Seager, you mean? Who doesn't? He's famous. His reputation is rising steadily—now that he's dead, and there is no one belonging to him to enjoy it."

He watched her as he spoke, but she made no movement.

"As a matter of fact," he went on, "I have a book about him here. You can read it if you like. He wasn't only a great painter: he was a great man."

A tremor went through her shoulders, but she did not speak.

His voice had risen. "He was a genius, my girl. Do you know what that is? It doesn't happen often. Every now and then a man is born into the world who has the perception and sensitiveness of the artist, and the single-mindedness, the absolute ruthlessness, which are necessary to give them full effect. In other words, a genius. Seager was one of them. You must never judge men of that type by ordinary standards. They can't help themselves. They are in the grip of a force as great as life."

She turned slowly. He started at the sight of her face.

"You mean . . . he was not a bad man?"

"Sheila! My dear! You poor child."

She did none of the things he expected. She came steadily to him, stopped, and said gravely:

"No one would tell me anything about him. I did not know for years that he was my father."

David looked down at her. Her face was up-turned to his.

"Now I shall be happy," she whispered, "now that I know he was not bad."

She put up her face like a child, and David kissed her. She stood for a couple of seconds, then gently stepped away. David could not speak. Her face was radiant as the sea.

She smiled.

"I must go now," she said. "They will be missing me."

### III

DAVID LAY ON his back, staring out of the window into brilliant moonlight. From time to time his body jerked as if he were attacked by cramp, and he moved from side to side, coming back always to the first position.

He lay, doggedly bearing, as he had schooled himself to do, the weight of depression that had settled on him. After Sheila's departure, he had gone walking as fast as he could, borne up by happiness, and struggling to retain it. The nakedness of her simplicity had shaken him and made him ashamed. He saw sharply once again how simple life could be, if human beings only faced it simply.

But, back in the cottage, he had lost the precarious happiness and all security. The habits of years, the disease of civilisation, crept back on him, and misgiving—deep as his first trust—gripped and chilled him. Writhing, he had tortured himself with his own contempt.

What was all this, and where would it lead? What, under heaven, had induced him to reveal himself to this ignorant girl—Seager's daughter though she might be? What was this new exhibitionism, this attempt to discard all the responsibilities of his years and become as a little child? You worm, he said to himself: you miserable worm, trying to get back to the nursery, undressing your mind in the presence of a gaping child.

It would serve you right if—he caught his breath in agony at the thought—if she retailed it to the people at the farm, if she amused them as they sat over the fire, puffing at their

filthy pipes. How they would guffaw! how the old crone would snigger! He grew hot at the thought.

Then, in violent reaction, he was ashamed. That girl was not laughing at him. It was no laughing matter for her. It was he who was the trifle, playing upon her emotions for the pleasure of it.

With a jerk, he sat up and flung back the clothes. For God's sake, let yourself alone! Why can't you take what comes, as you eat your meals and forget about them?

He got out of bed, and went over to the window, trying to drive out, by the sheer beauty of the scene, the pictures that burned before his mind. Sheila, frightened, bewilderment in her eyes, and Alison, her delicate nose lifted in contempt. "Philandering with a little farm drudge." He could hear her clear, fastidious voice. He could see Seton, contemptuous, recovering himself by the exercise of his professional tolerance. There they were, on that side of the water, despising or pitying him: and here, things were no better. From the people into whose midst he had come, his memory could not recall one kindly glance. They were suspicious of him, afraid, reserved. The one man of them who knew anything, the priest, scarcely bothered to hide his contempt. Still, it was as well, he told himself, grinding his heel into a hole in the carpet: for if they had been kind, he would have abused their kindness.

Unable to bear more, he thrust his feet into slippers, pulled a pair of trousers and a jacket over his pyjamas, and went out of the house and towards the bay. The full moon lit the scene, but harshly, without colour, making it, for all its brilliance, little more than a photograph. Away to his left, the sea was a sheet of silver, and the mountain

reared itself into the sky, a dark blue bulk, lightened here and there with veins the colour of gunmetal. The foothills below it were dazed with moonlight.

The sea lay still. Even at its edge, there was little sound, only the weak childish abandonment of a tiny wave turning over on the sand. David stood, breathing deeply, waiting for his heart to slow down and the fever to leave his blood. If this peace could not quiet him, he had better strip and plunge in the sea. And stay in it. Stay in it, and make an end. You are no good here.

He gave a laugh at that, for he knew perfectly well that, come what might, he would never kill himself. He had not the guts. It was a little, safe kite that his mind flew every now and then, to see if it could impress him.

He contemplated this, and realised that several times during the last two or three minutes he had heard voices without heeding them. He listened. The sea at once began to make more sound; three or four little waves splashed at his feet. He stepped further up the sand, and listened again. It came clearly now, a sound of voices, men's voices, away by the river mouth. He could see nothing. Whatever they were doing, they were hidden round the bend.

Accepting the diversion, he strode towards them. The sand squeaked under his feet, with every now and then a brittle crunch as he stepped over deposits of tiny shells. As he passed in front of the bushes where he had seen the sheep's skull, he heard a scuttling noise, and stopped abruptly. A rank, musty smell hit his nostrils.

"Who's there?" he cried sharply. "Come out!"

There was more scuttling and scuffling, and a fresh wave of the smell. A goat, I suppose, he thought. He

stooped, found a stone, flung it into the bushes, and went on.

Four minutes brought him to the mouth of the estuary. The voices came clearly now. Rounding the bend, he saw a small group of figures in the moonlight. Two men were stand knee-deep in the water, holding something between them. A couple more were watching from the shore.

David stared, and then, quick as the click of a camera shutter, the meaning of the scene flashed to his mind. They were laying a net across the mouth of the river—*his* river. They were doing it at night, so that he should not know about it, and the boat was waiting for the catch to take it away.

He stopped short, meaning to take cover till he could think what to do, but it was too late. He had been seen. The pallor of a face turned towards him in the moonlight, and immediately there was uproar. The men were shouting and swearing. They stumbled about like drunks, then two splashed out to sea, leaped aboard the small boat and began to row away as if possessed. The small group left on the shore came together, consolidating itself to await David's approach.

As he came up to them, the tallest figure, visible as Owen, came to meet him. His hair was dishevelled, and he was breathing fast.

"Mr. Heron! We had a time with them indeed! They are poachers: they come from down the coast." He pointed vaguely with his arm. "The times are bad for them, and they were trying to fish your river. They had laid a great net across it, but we got them before they could draw it in."

The moonlight was strong: David could see their faces. He looked round upon them. Peadar was there, sullen,

avoiding his eye. Elizabeth looked at him boldly, then looked down. There were cavernous shadows under her eyes and her cheek-bones in the moonlight. Sheila was there too. She swung her leg, kicking at the sand, and looked out to sea.

A rush of sympathy came over David. He knew at once that he should accept their story, pathetic though it was in its obvious falsity.

But the black mood was still strong upon him. Anger swirled back, curdling his first generous impulse. It rose in his throat, and his temples throbbed as if they would crack. Ever since he had come here, these people had set themselves against him, and now they were trying to deceive him with lies so blatant that they would not deceive a child.

He addressed Owen directly.

"You are lying," he said, and the man drew himself up with a gasp that was more like a hiss. "It was you who laid the net, and whoever is in that boat is in your employ. You must think I'm a fool, to swallow a yarn like that." His voice rose. "The rights of this fishing are mine, mine, do you hear? I have paid for them, and I shall see that no one uses them but myself."

Owen's face was terrible. It seemed as if he were about to strike the man who had insulted him. Then his hand fell to his side, and without a word, he turned and strode off in the direction of the farm. Peadar and Elizabeth turned too, and were moving away, when a shrill, mad cackle of laughter spilled through the air, electrifying them all. It was followed by another and another, curving, bubbling shrieks, and old Kate came skipping over the sand towards them. Her bent frame was convulsed by an unholy energy, and David shuddered, then drew back,



attacked by the same nauseous smell he had smelled earlier on.

"That's what was in the bushes, then."

He turned and strode back along the beach as fast as he could. The bizarre horror of Kate's appearance had for the moment killed his anger. There, he thought, but for the sense that made us fight decay as if it were a fiend, might we all go. Yet hardly; for whereas most of those who go that way sink to it through misfortune, she exulted in it. His face curled as he imagined that old body stripped of its rags, the filth of her nails, the stench, the pouching skin. Throwing his head back, he drew in deep breaths of the sea air, so cool it seemed like water.

He had covered most of the distance to the cottage when he heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Sheila. They looked at each other, he angrily defensive, she eager for reconciliation.

David spoke first.

"We seem to run across each other a good deal today," he said cruelly.

She was too full of what she had to say to heed him.

"Don't be angry with Owen. He has fished the river for so long that he thinks he has the right to it. Donough doesn't understand either. He was just taking the fish away to sell them for Owen. They don't mean any harm."

"Oh, so that was friend Donough?" He went on, quickening his stride, so that she had to run to keep pace with him.

"Yes, but he is not selling them for himself. He gets plenty of fish."

"Takes turn and turn about with Owen, I suppose. You're a nice lot."

"We—they do it," she panted, "all the time, when no

one is here. It is only for a month or two that the fishing is let, and they have lived here all their lives."

"Well, I really don't see what you expect me to do. During those months, they must leave the river alone. It's the only honest thing. If they can't see that by the light of nature, they must be taught it. The rights are mine, and I should be a fool to let myself be robbed. Why should Owen or Donough or any of them take what I have paid for?"

It was one of the rare occasions when Sheila longed to let go the tears that were choking her. She hardly ever wanted to cry. Here she was, trotting along in utter indignity at the side of a man who was insulting her and hers. Above, from the track, she knew that Owen had watched her in a black fury, watched her follow the man who had insulted him, the head of the family. He would beat her when she got home.

"If you would stop and hear what I have to say," she panted indignantly, for she was now running after him like a puppy, "I could explain."

"No, thanks."

He went on faster than ever, and, from sheer misery and indecision, she pursued him. They came to the cottage. He looked round, but went in and swung the gate shut after him. She opened it, and followed. The door slammed, and she opened that too.

He was at the foot of the stairs, cursing and fumbling. He struck a match, and the weak light flared up against his face. She stood, her breast rising and falling, trying to get her breath, to make him see this terribly important thing.

"I don't know what you are doing here," he said. "I don't want you."

"You must listen. You do not understand."

"I understand that you are forcing yourself in here when I have told you to go home."

She winced as if she had been slapped in the face.

"You did not tell me to go home."

"I tell you now. Go home and get to bed."

"But . . ."

"Get *out!*"

He turned and went up the stairs, going into his bedroom and slamming the door.

Several minutes passed before Sheila moved. When she came to herself, it was to realise that she was very hungry. Without a second thought, she turned to satisfy her immediate need. She groped her way to the kitchen, lit the lamp, and soon was munching at a roughly made sandwich, scowling and tearing at it like a ravenous young animal. She ate with her thoughts elsewhere. When she had finished, she rinsed her fingers perfunctorily under the tap and glanced round the kitchen. Now that she was here, she might as well set the things for breakfast.

She moved forward, then stopped. If he wanted his breakfast, let him get it himself. He was rude, he was hateful. What he had said hurt her the more, because she had been on a peak of gratitude that had reached affection.

A little smile crept along her lips as she pictured him coming down in the morning, wanting his food and missing her. How dared he speak as he had! She gave a savage little kick at a kitchen cloth which lay on the floor. The kick had no effect, except that the cloth, heavy and wet, curled round her foot.

She looked round, the anger passing as quickly as it had

come. Yes, the room was untidy, and so was the sitting-room. She shrugged her shoulders. She would leave everything as it was.

A moment later she had blown out the lamp, and slipped out of the back door.

#### IV

A FLOCK OF CORMORANTS bobbed on the surface of the water, rising and sinking until only their black necks showed over the slow gleaming undulation. Coming to a crevasse, David clambered down the rocks to the foot of the little cliff, and stared upwards. Yes, there were the nests. The face of the rock was black with umbrella-like mother birds, perching safely on the ledges, their long necks rising from their glossy breasts, giving them an air of anxious detachment, as if their thoughts were out at sea, not on the grey bundles struggling by their sides.

Wafts of stale fish stirred in the air. Wrinkling his nose, David approached the base of the cliff. The nearest cormorant glared at him, and her throat began to pulsate as she uttered an almost voiceless rattle of admonition. Her baby wriggled in dismay, and she pecked it vigorously, whereupon it threw up a gulletful of undigested food. The male birds, out to sea, floated unconcernedly.

Scrambling up the gulley, David continued his walk, and presently found himself at the extreme end of the promontory, looking out to the small rocky islands. As he went further, he was almost deafened by the birds, a ceaseless chain of cries blending themselves into noise which he could feel beating on the surface of his skin: the harsh cries of the gulls, the shriek of the terns, the shrill fuss of the oyster-catchers, a repetitive protesting clamour.

A few more steps, and some of the birds began to swoop and make vicious dips towards his head. It was hard not to duck. He saw why they were alarmed. They nested on the rocky island straight ahead. Scores of them circled restlessly above it in clouds, the majority wheeling round and round, a few side-tracking and making a wider circle. Their discordant cries fell into harmony, or else his ear became attuned, as to an unfamiliar scale.

He clambered to the right, hiding from himself the fact that he was close to Sheila's sanctuary. She must like noise, he thought. Surmounting a rock, he looked down into the hollow, and saw her lying stretched out, her cheek upon her hand. The odds against finding her were enormous, and not until that moment did he admit the hope in which he had started out.

She did not move as he climbed down, and he saw that, despite the clamour of the birds, she was asleep. Her face was pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Neglected hair made a waif of her, and on her left arm a large bruise showed. For the first time he wondered what had happened when she had left him the night before.

Full of strange content, he sat down without disturbing her, took his letters from his pocket, and laid them unopened on the grass. Folding his arms, he stared at the sea below. It came in to the cliff's base, clear above the white sand, a pure emerald green. Here and there were patches of deep turquoise above a rock, and an indescribable colour where there was dark weed. He sat, dazed with light and sound, scarcely conscious of himself, at the mercy of all around him. Delight that was half apprehension rippled inside him like a breeze, and came out to his skin, where it broke and made him part of the whole

glittering stream of sensation. He began to slip, he was slipping fast—then the old fearful, critical self clutched at him, crying, This is the darkness from the past. This is your heritage which led you astray: the thing we have agreed to destroy.

He shivered as a breeze rose from the water. Sheila too trembled as she slept. He stared down at her, lying beside him, and wondered why it should be so reassuring to have her there, now that her consciousness was withdrawn. He realized that he liked to have her near him. A hostage, he thought; and wondered what he meant.

He looked at her again. She was thin, and her features were too haphazard for real beauty. That priest had been standing on the wrong foot. There was no danger to her, but not because he lacked virility. He thought of Alison, of her too perfect symmetry, her glossy silky hair, of her well-cared-for beauty, the delicacy with which she walked into a room. Better this than that! The twist on his lips gave way to tenderness as he turned to the child beside him.

He felt an impulse to put his arms around her, to gather her close to him. For a moment he doubted himself. Could he, who had held such beauty as Alison's in his arms, desire this savage little peasant girl?

No; it wasn't that. It was something Alison could not call from him, something he had never felt before. He put an arm over the thinly-clad body, and again there floated through him the feeling that had come from the light and the sea and the noise of the birds, though it was tenderer now, and less exultant.

The clamouring birds, the cold sea, and Sheila lying as if dead beside him. It meant everything, or it meant nothing.

He did not know. He was lost in a strange place. He shivered again, and wanted her urgently to wake and speak to him.

He moved his hand from her shoulder to her cheek, and began to stroke it gently. She opened her eyes, looked up at him, and smiled, as if the awakening were only a continuance of her dream. For a little while she lay like this, lazily opening and closing her eyes, smiling half in amusement.

Cautiously, he moved his arm, afraid now of her touch; but she nestled up against it.

"I was thinking you were Donough," she said.

He drew away at that, but she continued sleepily, "I am cold, and I was dreaming frightening things. Donough was to take me in his boat, and we were going to start, and Donough was in the boat, holding the rock for me to jump in, but when I came, he waved me back and said No, and pointed. I looked round, and he was pointing at you."

David forced a laugh.

"I don't know why I should worry him. He has had me in his boat before, on his own invitation."

"He pushed off the boat then, and turned his back on me. I called for you to come, but you were not there any more."

David drew further away from her and clasped his arms round his knees. He was troubled at the disturbance he felt when she talked of the fisherman. After all, he asked himself, hardening his mind, why should she not have her lover—if he is her lover?

Aloud, he said, "Here's my coat," slipped out of it and put it round her shoulders. She snuggled into it and smiled at him.



"And Donough is the sportsman who was making off last night with my fish?"

Her eyes darkened.

"You would like him if you knew him."

"You talk as if I had never met him."

"Oh, I know, but that was——"

"Only courtesy. It didn't count?"

"You cannot know a person in one meeting. But I know you would like Donough. He has travelled, he knows about people and foreign countries. He does not read books," she added quickly, as if to ward off an accusation. "But he can tell stories."

He looked at her, half out of his ill humour.

"You are a queer lot down here, you and your stories."

"Father Morrissey says we are mad, just as you do. But not for telling stories. He tells stories himself."

"I know he does."

"Father Morrissey says that the Islanders have nothing but drink and stories to keep them alive. He says there won't be any stories now, because there are wireless sets instead, and there will be only drink."

"Have you a wireless?"

She shook her head. "I wish we had. It must be grand to hear people talk and sing whenever you like."

David grunted. He was going to say something damping, but checked it. Instead, he got up, stepped carefully to the edge of the hollow, and looked through his field-glasses at the mainland and at the near, towering shoulder of the mountain.

She was up beside him in a moment.

"Let me see, please."

He handed the glasses to her, showing her how to adjust the focus. She uttered an exclamation of wonder.

"Look," she said. "You can see the rocky ridge of the mountain, the steep one."

He looked at her indulgently.

"Do people ever climb it?"

"Oh yes, sometimes, but it is very hard."

"It looks easy."

"Yes, but the mist comes, and they lose themselves. Years ago, three people got lost, and Alec postman and a stranger looked for them. They thought it would be quite easy, but when they got near the top, something frightened them, and they came hurrying down. They were very sick. Alec postman said he would never go up again."

"What about the lost party?"

"They found the bodies a long while after."

He looked at her sharply, to see if she were trying to produce an effect, but she had said it quite naturally.

"On the other side, the mountain is easy to climb. Anybody can get up there."

"You are as good as a guide-book."

She gave a gratified smile. He wrinkled his brow, marveling what a child she was. It seemed impossible to get any further with her. They were in a pleasant, unreal little place, just like this hollow; unexpected, detached, nothing to do with the world. I ought to be working, he thought, not standing here talking to this child. I have done nothing here. This place gets between me and my work, instead of helping me.

If it comes to that, how is she here? She always pretends to be so busy.

"How did you manage to get away? I thought you said your uncles kept you hard at work."

"Susie is strayed."

"Susie?"

"The little brown ass. They sent me to look was she on the shore."

"But you've been here some time."

"There is only the one place she goes down here. If she is not here, it is inland she is gone. I know that, but they don't."

"H'm. Why do they want her, anyway?"

She opened her eyes. "To carry turfs from the bog."

There was another silence. David fidgeted. He was not enough at ease with her to be silent, and did not know what to say. Besides, he was beginning to feel restless. The sense of work undone disturbed him, without impelling him to do anything definite.

Sheila spoke so suddenly that he jumped.

"My pictures are gone," she said simply.

"What?"

"My pictures; they are gone. They have been taken out of my trunk."

He stared at her.

"It is John," she said. "He has them. I can tell from the way he looks at me."

"If you know he has them, that's easy. We must get them back."

She shook her head sadly.

"I shall never see them again. I knew Owen or John would get them one day. I was afraid of having them. And now that he knows they are worth money——"

"He must have known that for a long time. When the men came looking for them."

"He knows it more since you came."

David clicked his tongue. "I suppose you told him?"

She faced him half-defiantly. "I did. They often say

slighting things. They belittled my father, and I answered up."

He looked at her.

"At any rate," he said, "the pictures are still in the family. No harm can come to them. If John has them, and knows they are valuable, he will keep them safe all right."

She shook her head: then, her mood abruptly changing, she began to talk to him about her mother, and of how she had worn the dresses which Seager had ordered for her, and he painted her in each of them, except the lace dress with the red rose, which he said did not suit her.

"He wanted to paint her as Mary, the Mother of Christ," she said, dropping her voice.

"Did he?"

"No. She was so shocked, she would not speak to him for days." She smiled. "I do not know why she minded. I would let myself be painted as anyone, but I would have liked best of all to wear the black lace frock with the red flower. Only I do not know how the flower should be worn. Do you know?"

David smiled at her. "In the mouth," he said.

She stared, and shook her head.

"You never showed me those pictures," said David. "You said you would."

"You will never see them now. It is a pity."

"I'll see them all right."

"They would never give them to you."

"My child, as I have told you, and you don't seem at all to realise, those pictures are valuable. When a man is as important as your father was, what he has left belongs to the world. I have no intention of allowing your admirable uncles to sit on those pictures."

She looked at him unconvinced.

"Elizabeth says that when my mother was wearing one of the dresses, she had to sit in a boat to be painted. Owen came along and frightened her, and she jumped up and fell in the water, and the dress was spoiled."

"I can't see why he wanted to dress her up."

Sheila opened her eyes wide.

"She would never have let him paint her in her ordinary clothes. I expect she only had dresses like mine, and I would never let anyone paint me in this."

"Never mind. We will buy you a new one some time."

David spoke absently. The conversation was ceasing to interest him. He was becoming preoccupied, and hated it, knowing that it was the symptom of an approaching period of gloom. Sheila and his enjoyment of the day were sliding away from him: the familiar heaviness was coming down, with all its crippling weight. In an effort to distract himself, he took up his letters.

"Do you mind if I read these?"

The question only astonished Sheila, and, without waiting for an answer, he slit the letters open. One was from his sister, saying she was sending him some books. Another was from Seton, to the effect that he hoped to come over before long. It was a friendly, non-committal letter, skillfully free from the forced brightness of his sister's.

The third was from Alison. He read it, feeling dizzy. He could never read anything Alison had written without recollecting that the paper had stared up at her face, at the perfect curve of her nostrils, and her clear brows, and had felt her breath. The thought, which used to stagger him with emotion, still had an automatic power.

The letter was short and characteristic. Like his sister's, it had the firm reasonableness which one addresses to a lunatic or a child. The writing was regular and neat, each letter perfectly formed, and the lines were straight. There was no crowding, no hurrying.

He read it with a terrible apprehension, his heart beating loudly, though he could not at all have said what he feared. Folding it with hands that shook, he put it back in the envelope, and stuffed all three into his pocket.

Sheila was looking at him. He turned to her with a perfunctory smile.

"I think I shall go for a swim."

He felt her disappointment, and almost shared it, but half of him was glad that he had failed her and escaped her friendliness. This day nothing had been kindled between them. He was left free.

He stood up, and, still looking at him intently, she slipped off his coat and handed it to him. He nodded and walked away, holding his shoulders stiffly.

His heart was still beating hard: it quickened rather than slowed. Scrambling along, not looking where he was going, he slipped twice on the weed, the second time ignominiously, only just saving himself with his hands. He glared round, but Sheila was out of sight.

Calmer, he tried to lay his anger aside, and look at the thing more reasonably. It was absurd that Alison's letter should produce such an effect. He should have got over by now the excitement her physical presence could so often call up in him. Any sudden sight of her was liable to provoke it, though he could be with her for weeks and never feel it once. It was a useless residue, like one's appendix: it had no meaning.

Oh well, he told himself bitterly, you put all your eggs

into one basket, so I suppose it's only natural a sight of the basket should disturb you, even though it's empty.

A sort of conditioned reflex, really, he thought, as he began to strip. A given stimulus has so often roused a given emotion that, when you're taken unawares, it rouses the emotion again, in spite of all that has happened in between.

Yet that didn't square with the ordinary rule of husbands and wives. Once the spark had gone, nothing could rekindle it. Could it be that——?

He dived, and the cold shock of the water scattered his perplexities.

Sheila had watched him go, her heart sinking, till she thought it would fall out of her. He had left her so casually. She had failed to interest him. She meant absolutely nothing to him.

Her disappointment sharpened into pain. Suppose he should leave Kilree?

It did not occur to her to question her feeling or to take herself to task for it. She raised no barrier against it, for she had not yet been hurt, and knew nothing of how to defend herself. She accepted the fact that, since David came, her life had taken on a new colour. Since he came, she had seen and felt more than she could absorb. It was as if his words and his presence kindled all kinds of little lamps, promising to light for her things she had not known to exist.

He must not leave yet. Not yet, till she knew more. There was no one to take his place except Donough, who knew her too well, yet did not know her at all.

She got up, and looked if she could see David, but he had disappeared. She waited for a few minutes more; then limping with stiffness, she made her way slowly home.

As she came to the farm, walking along pensively, looking at the ground, she started to hear her name called. She looked up, and saw Owen coming to her from the door. A glance told her that he was very angry, and that she must use all her wits to escape a beating.

She waited till he came to her, standing quietly, with her hands at her sides. Although she did not fear him, her heart thumped till it hurt.

"I could not find the ass," she said. "She is not down any place by the shore."

Owen gave no sign that he had heard. He stood glaring at her silently. When he spoke, his voice was so different from its usual rough loudness that she turned cold.

"You will listen to me, and do what I say. You are to go no more with the man David Heron, nor ever speak with him again. If you disobey me, you will leave my house for ever."

"But why?" She was fighting for time. "What has he done? Who will get his food for him?"

"He has insulted us," said her uncle with dignity. "He has given the lie to me, Owen Brosnan, and he shall never be forgiven. You," he pointed at her suddenly, "you are like your mother. You would take sides with an enemy, with a man who brought disgrace upon your people."

He choked, and then shouted at her in a voice more like his own, "I forbid you, I forbid you! You shall make your choice once for all, and swear on the Cross to do as I say."

She shrank back.

"I cannot do that."

"You shall swear."

She was very white. She tilted up her chin, and her eyes met his.



"And if I will not?"

"If you will not, you shall go the way your mother went."

The implication of the words roared round her like the sound of the sea. She could not think. It was too sudden. She was not ready. She must have time.

"I cannot swear now. I need food, I am sick. Let me rest till I feel better, and then I will swear."

"You will choose now between this man and me."

It was like her dream, she thought, with a sudden realisation of what the dream had meant. Out of the dream she answered.

"I do not want to live with David. I only want to cook his food and wash and sweep for him."

Owen's brows came down terribly at the Christian name. His mouth worked, and he repeated, "You will choose."

Choose what? Willingly she would leave Owen's house and live in David's, but that was not the choice. David was her friend: he had no one but her. She wanted to make up to him for the unfriendliness of the others, to be there when he needed her. He liked her, sometimes he liked her very much, but there were times when he did not want her.

Would he like to have her always there? Could she go to him without asking him first? If she did, might he not go away and leave her, as her father had left her mother?

Yes, that was the danger. He might go away and leave her.

Donough would not like her to go to the cottage. She was quite certain of that. Elizabeth did not like David, either.

If she went to him, she would lose all her friends, and could not be sure of him. Unhappily, she looked at Owen.

"I will swear."

He gripped her wrist, and dragged her towards the house.

Hearing a sound of whistling, she looked away, and saw David going back to the cottage, his hair ruffled from his bathe. He waved to her, but, with Owen's grip tightening on her wrist, she made no response.

A minute later, she was in the farm kitchen, holding the Cross, and repeating in faltering tones her uncle's words.

V

THE DEATH OF his cow told badly on Peadar's health. He had been failing for a couple of years, as the gradual yellowing of his skin and the deliberation of his movements showed. His eyes had a thin film over them, which dimmed their bright, light blue, and his speech was becoming uncertain. Phrases would break in the middle, or trail off into nothingness. But, until the accident to his cow, he had refused to admit any change in himself, and had not consciously altered his routine.

Now, by the happenings of a few hours, his habits of a lifetime were broken. The unseen hand struck him suddenly: his daily programme, which was his very existence, had come to an end. Those walks to and from the byre, the tending and companionship of his last remaining cow, had kept the old man alive. He could go no further.

He could not bear even to look towards the empty byre. He could not bear to visit Elizabeth and see her minding her cow, her few sheep, her hens. He took to sitting all day beside his cottage, staring out to sea, motionless as a mummy.

Sometimes old Kate would come and chatter at him. If he heard her, he never betrayed it by as much as a turn of the head. Perhaps, in his innermost self, he connected her with the death of his cow. She was half a witch, and she wished him ill. Outwardly, it was David Heron whom he blamed. It had become a fixed idea with him that the coming of the stranger had caused Martha's death. Forgetting the natural deaths of the other cows, he told himself

that such a thing had never happened to him till this foreigner had come. Once before, a calamity had befallen the little community, when a stranger settled in their midst. That time it was the Brosnans who had suffered. This time, it was himself.

The idea so persisted in his mind that, from sitting motionless all day, he developed a new activity. He would dog Heron's footsteps and anticipate his coming to a place whenever it was possible. He could not walk far now, and his strength seemed to be declining each day, but he had learned his enemy's habits. He would be ready for him when he came for his early morning and evening bathe. Occasionally, he would even get so far as the cottage, and lie in wait beside the gate. He was like a man who goes every day to look at the place where his son was drowned. He never spoke to Heron, nor made a movement when he approached. He just stared at him, his old face lifeless as a mask.

It was on one of those occasions that David found him close by the rock where he usually undressed. Peadar was sitting on a pile of stones, his hands clasped on his stick, which he held upright in front of him.

David addressed him with a tentative cheerfulness.

"Good evening, Peadar. How is the back these days?"

He might have been addressing a stone image. His face hardened, and he stepped nearer to the old man.

"Peadar," he shouted. "Listen to me. You are doing yourself no good, brooding like this. Whether you blame me for this matter or not, you are making yourself ill. Do you hear?"

Peadar continued to gaze out to sea.

"Blast you, you old dunderhead!" David kicked at a pile of pebbles, and they scattered noisily on the shingle. "Have it your own way. You are as mad as the rest of them."

He spoke the last sentence with a peculiar vehemence, for he had come to believe in the last few days that the people round him were mentally affected. The helpless survivors of a dead community, they were disintegrating fast in their isolation.

Sheila had changed too. Not only did she avoid him, hardly acknowledging his greeting if by chance they passed, but she had ceased coming to the cottage. Her place was taken by old Elizabeth, who kept the place much cleaner, and cooked surprisingly well. Elizabeth never spoke to him, never even looked at him, and did not stay in the same room with him for a second longer than she needed to give him his food or take away the empty plates. She was the nearest approach to an automaton, and, after a first attempt at conversation, he was thankful to have it so.

Yet his temper worsened, and his depressions fell on him more often. He missed Sheila. He made an effort to sweep her out of his mind, as rubbish which had no place there, but it was little use. What hurt most was that he thought he knew why she had gone. It had happened to him so often, the first friendliness of people and the quick cooling off. His temper or his coldness alienated them, and when once he felt friendship beginning to withdraw, he did his best to hurry the break and make it final.

It had been that way with all his friends except Seton. Seton had withstood all attempts at alienation. It both angered and delighted David that he could not shake him off. When he found him apparently invulnerable, his affection grew, and at the same time he increased his efforts to make him angry.

Peadar was still there when he had finished his bathe, and while he dressed. David shouted good night to him, and headed for home. Assure himself as he might that the old

man was mad, he was hurt by the rebuff, and worked to distract himself as he walked.

A large toad crawled out of the bog across his path, quickening its pace clumsily as it heard his tread. Caught unawares again, he heard another voice, this time his mother's.

"Come out, David, quickly! Look at what I have got here."

Her voice had an uncontrolled eagerness, like a child's, an eagerness that any silly little thing could produce, in the midst of her work or on any occasion. Slowly, to show his detachment, he had sauntered out of the French window into the garden, where in the evening's dusk his mother was bending over something on the grass.

He went unwillingly, because she had been annoying his father, who, after a scene, had shut himself into his study. Now she was trying to make up to him, David, as if nothing had happened.

His face set in disapproval, he walked over to where she was. She was bending over a large ugly toad, which crouched in the grass, imagining that it had concealed itself. She squatted down and touched its warty back.

"I hope he will stay here. I can imagine I am back in the bogs. Isn't he fine?"

He felt himself respond, then angrily he pulled himself up, reminding himself of his duty, and what was fit. Calling him out to see a fat, old toad, when she had just hurt his father!

"I don't care about your beastly old toad."

He could see her flinch as if he had hit her on the mouth. He could see the darkness fall over her face, as if the blow were one she could not understand.

She stood up.

"I am sorry I disturbed you," she said, and added bitterly, "you are just like your father."

David quickened his pace, muttering to himself. He was approaching the farm, but, intent on his own thoughts, he saw nothing around him. His will gathered itself together in a hard knot. He gesticulated and shook his fist.

"I will beat them all!" he cried aloud. "I will stay here and recover myself, and beat them all!"

He heard his own voice, and realised what he was doing. Jerking up his head, he saw, with a chill of dismay so sharp that it seemed to cut the connection between his mind and his body, that he was opposite the gate of the farm, and that John Brosnan was leaning over that gate, staring at him. In the instant before he sprang to self-defence, he saw something. "The man is mad," his perceptions cried, and then he saw only the leering hostility in the dull, half-closed eyes.

Ashamed at having exposed himself, he stopped and confronted John.

"You seem to have plenty of time on your hands," he said aggressively.

John gave no sign: then, to David's discomfort, his loose lips drew away from his teeth in a derisive smile. David's mind, agile to escape from its discomfiture, jumped to a vantage point.

"Seen any more weasels lately?"

The eyes gleamed with fear and anger, and the body shifted a little. Fool, said David to himself, fool and cad. Now he'll be sure you did it. What a worm you are, to remind the man of a humiliation.

In an effort to rehabilitate himself, he improvised.

"I should like to have a word with your brother some time soon, about the cottage. I am thinking of getting some repairs put through, if he would like to co-operate."

After a moment's silence, John slightly turned his head and nodded towards the farm.

"No, I can't come in now. I will see him later. You might tell him I want to speak to him."

A change came over John's face, and David, following his gaze, saw Sheila coming, a basket on her arm. She was coming up from the shore and had not yet seen them. He hesitated, tightened his lips, and went on to the cottage.

In the doorway of the sitting room, he drew back.

"Seton! You here? I thought . . .!"

His voice trailed away, and he stared unbelievably at the empty chair. He could swear Seton had been sitting there. He clutched the handle of the door, shaken and ashamed. This was bad. He must be more careful.

He found a meal ready for him in the kitchen, and ate savagely and without relish. At the same time he was strangely humbled; the illusion had been very real.

"I wasn't even thinking about him. This sort of nonsense is what the people live on here. The place is choked with it." He pushed his plate away. "They're all moribund. They should be cleared out, and the place well disinfected after them."

He unstopped the decanter and splashed whiskey into his glass.

"I am a fool to stay here," he said, and drank it off.

Physically refreshed, he returned to the living room and lit the fire. He kicked off his canvas shoes and stretched his bare feet on the fender. He felt sleepy and mindless, and lay back in his chair and dozed, till the effect of the drink dropped from him, and he was wide awake and strained, as if the whole weight of the house pressed upon every nerve of his body.

He wound the gramophone and put on a record. For a

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short while the beat of the dance tune lifted him, and his body moved in response. Then he was conscious only of the screeching orchestration, and of the notes that pierced his brain like a steel knitting needle. With an exclamation of disgust, he wrenched the disc off and let it slip to the ground, where it cracked across.

He sank back in his chair and stared at the wall. No wonder he was so anxious to call everyone else mad. Alison had said it—that evening: and, from the way she said it, he had seen that she believed it.

The ugly scene played itself in front of him again. Alison, beautifully dressed, calm, but bright of eye: himself, ridiculously half-clothed. She had come with the telephone message, the invitation which she wished him to accept.

"I won't," he stormed, taken at a disadvantage. "You know perfectly well she patronises me as if she had picked me out of the gutter. Can't you see it? Or are you too much of a snob to care?"

"I can't pretend for a moment that I want your company. But this dinner-party is being given for you and me. If you refuse again this time, it will be taken as an insult."

"I do refuse. Given for me, indeed! Given so that she can laugh with your friends at my expense: talk behind our backs about poor, dear Alison's lout of a husband."

"Is that final? It is important for me, remember."

Receiving no answer, she had gone to the telephone. When she came back, she was more agitated than he had ever seen her. Her face was white, fanatical.

"You have insulted my friends," she said. "You are unbearable. Not content with making yourself hated, you must drag me in too. There is no point in—in going on any further like this." She twined her fingers, and her voice went shrill. "I won't stay tied to a madman."

"For God's sake, Alison——"

I suppose it would have happened some time, if not then, he thought, remembering his own bewilderment at the speed of it all. Seton had seen to everything, made the arrangements. It was so hard to remember. It was all a blur. He had been in a dream, half shocked and half relieved that the inevitable had taken place, and that he had at last thrust away from him the woman he loved.

Thinking back, David wondered if Seton had not enjoyed his part in it.

Treachery, said the small devil inside him. You will lose him too.

He yawned, and looked at the clock. Getting up slowly, he poured himself another drink.

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## VI

FOR DAYS AFTER the scene with Owen, Sheila had gone about in a trance, pale and self-contained. She worked at the farm with a new concentration, and spoke to no one. She took trouble to avoid David, and, knowing his habits, she was able to do so with little difficulty. Once or twice, by ill luck, she ran across him, but always where she could escape.

While she worked, her mind turned over endlessly the problem of Owen's command and her oath. Whether she would keep this oath she did not know. She had given it to gain time, but she was waiting now until her mind, having assimilated the matter, should tell her what to do. Scruples she had none. She could deceive without hesitation when, as she knew, she had been used unscrupulously. Brought up as an orphan, free of those strings with which parents tie their children to them, Sheila was accustomed to stand alone, and did not at all mind the loneliness which deception brings.

At an age when most adolescents are straining to break the first string, to betray the first unfair trust a parent has put upon them, Sheila had cut all the thin threads, unstrengthened by love, that bound her to Owen, her sole protector. She was bound to Elizabeth, only so far that it would hurt her a little to do what the old woman considered wrong: but she had enough self-knowledge to realise that this compunction was a weakness. Forced from childhood to know herself, Sheila knew those round her. She knew that

Elizabeth was a superstitious old woman, whose judgment in most matters was less than her own.

What troubled her was not the prospect of breaking her oath, but the doubt whether it needed breaking. Why did she wish to be with David, when he gave no sign of having noticed that she was away?

In her perplexity, she wished for Donough, but he was on one of his visits to the mainland, and there was no knowing when he would come back. She went about her work mechanically, keeping out of Owen's way, and hardly troubling to avoid John. Possibly encouraged by this, he cornered her one day in the angle of the wall outside the kitchen, but she threatened him with a basin and got away. Even so, the incident did not penetrate her mood. She threatened and escaped casually, with no more concern than if he were a goat barring her passage over a stile.

Then, one still evening, when, after a shower at four o'clock, the sky cleared and the whole heaven seemed to rise, and still rose and rose an incalculable height above the earth, she turned the corner of the hen-house to see Donough striding towards the farm. Before she knew, she had let a sharp low "Psssssst."

His face lit up, and he came bounding towards her. A couple of yards from her he pulled up in sudden awkwardness.

The awkwardness reached her. She felt her face reddening, and was angry with him in her mind.

"You got back," she said.

"Yes." He looked towards the farm. "Are you free?"

For answer she shrugged her shoulders, and put the empty basin down by the hen-house wall.

"Come to the shore."

She fell in beside him without a word, and they went

down to the water's edge. The tide was low: it was easy walking along the smooth rippled sand. Every now and then little streaks and streams of water seeped down. The light caught them, and they gleamed in indescribable colours which were not those of light or sky or sand.

Donough's stride was long, and Sheila often had to trot to keep up. She remembered the last time she had trotted after a man walking fast, and dismissed it from her mind. She knew where Donough was going. He was making for her special place on the cliff: and a pang shot through her as she remembered that she had last been there with David. Once again, she squeezed him out of her mind, almost in panic at the way in which, against all her desire, he kept appearing in it.

Donough and she had spent many hours in her place on the little promontory. All the times they had been there merged into one timeless spell, in which he grew without visible break from the boy who used to play with her and tease her, to the young man, as near God as she could conceive, who knew distant countries and peoples, not from books, but from going there and meeting them. This new friend looked like the Donough of old, spoke like him sometimes, had the same smile. It was confusing, and she wished it were not so. She knew him too well, and the boy constantly interrupted the strong and God-like man.

Then, next time he came, after a further year or more of absence, he had changed again. He was even more powerful, even more experienced, but less God-like. He seemed shy of her. There was a constraint between them, which hurt and thwarted her, for now, more than ever, she needed an assurance which only he could give her. And here he was, this evening, silent again, preoccupied, pretending interest in sky and sea, not meeting her eye.

They were making their way around the rocks. The gulls set up their clamour, but a little sleepily. Only a few roused themselves to deal with the invaders.

Donough took no notice, even of a tern which kept swooping viciously and swerving often a bare foot from his head. He made straight for the little place, without turning to see if she was following. There was no need for him to turn. On the rocks she was, if anything, more agile than he.

Then they were standing together in the hollow, with memories clamouring about them like the cries of the gulls. Sheila saw that she must take command. This huge, silent man, labouring with some storm inside his ribs, was the boy upon whose head she had hung chains of little flowers, and whom she had splashed from the rock pools. She made herself remember this as she stood beside him, for she needed his help now, and it was only through this old approach that she could reach him.

To her astonishment, he spoke before she did.

"'Tis a wonderful thing the hold this place has on me. I would come back to it wherever I was."

"There is little to hold you here now. There is more on the mainland."

She heard her voice in dismay. Why, why, say the hurtful thing when you need him most?

He answered shyly, becoming at once the stranger of whom she was afraid.

"Let us sit down for a little while."

She sat beside him without looking at him. After a minute he edged nearer to her. She continued to look away to sea, but she felt his huge hand close over the one on which she was propping herself. It wandered up her arm till it reached her shoulder, where it rested, heavy and comforting. Tears rose at the back of her eyes, and the impulse to lean towards

him and feel his great arm grip her was so great that she grew rigid with restraint.

He felt her stiffen, and, misunderstanding, dropped his hand. They drew away from each other. She could feel him looking at her, humbly, seeking his approach.

"I could not come before," he said apologetically. "The fishing has been good. I took twenty pounds for lobster alone last week, and I have only Jamie with me."

She could not find an answer.

"I need a bigger boat, and I shall have it. I shall bring the fishing back to Kilree. When I have the money, you and I——"

He broke off, and raised himself on his elbow.

"How did you pass the time these last few days?"

The question sent her thoughts back to David, and she shrugged her shoulders ungraciously. Once again words were forced from her, which took her by surprise.

"I do not know why you came back here at all, when you might have stayed abroad and bought big boats."

There was a pause before he answered.

"I could have made much money." The note of regret in his voice at once hurt and pleased her. "I learned many tricks out there, but I like best to be back."

She felt him glance at her averted face, and he went on slowly.

"There is no room in the big shipping for a man to make his way unless he is willing to knock down other people. I do not like that. Back here I have plenty of room, and there is no one in my way. At least, not yet."

Suddenly there was a different note in his voice.

"I could go back if I had a mind and build up a big life for myself. I found there was some sort of a place for me, and I could make money there too. But I would rather be here."

She had turned cold, as if a night wind blew on her very entrails. She knew at once it was not a vain boast. The little hollow vibrated with his power. She spoke, feeling that the words were ground out of her.

"It's a pity for you to be throwing away your chances in a place like this."

He turned, but still she did not look at him. Oh, please God, don't let me fight with Donough!

"So that is the way with you?"

She turned, struggling with her tears, and smiled. His face broke with relief, and he toppled clumsily against her. At last! The hard security of his arms around her. She crushed her body against his as if to test the strength of her support. The vehemence of her hold surprised him. On an impulse he got up, lifting her as if she were a child, and still holding her to him. Suddenly she drew away from him, her body taut. He made no attempt to break its resistance, only gripping her with one arm and letting his free hand move gently up and down her neck and shoulder.

"I have come back, and I will not stay away any more. Will you wed with me?"

She made no answer, though she no longer pressed away from him with her arm. He waited a moment, then loosed his grip and let her down. She stood beside him, feeling his resentment, and forced herself to speak.

"Do not ask me now. There are things I must talk about to you first."

In the long silence that followed her heart began to hammer against her ribs. Unable to bear it, she turned and saw that his face had gone pale under its brown. Slowly, he turned to her, forcing her to meet his eyes, and bent on her a look of such agonised suspicion that she cried out and shook her head in vehement denial.



The next instant she was off the ground again, and crushed against his chest. His body was hard as a rock, she could not breathe, and her ribs hurt her cruelly. She thought, He is killing me, but it does not matter.

Then he set her gently on her feet, still holding her, and staring into her face. Grasping her chin in his hand, he made her look at him. She saw his face through a haze, which seemed to float from it. It came close, she felt his lips, and her body was shot with a flame so sharp that she tried to tear herself free. The struggle passed, and, breathless, half annihilated, she saw his face again, still through an aura which blurred her vision. For a moment there was pity and love for her in his eyes, then his grasp tightened, and something indomitable floated over his face. She felt that she was dying and that the numbness of it had already seized her.

Then, just as her senses were going, he laid her tenderly down upon the grass. With a quick movement he slipped an arm under her and drew her very gently against him. She was resting now on his shoulder, and she closed her eyes, content to be against the warm wall of his body.

When he spoke, the vibration of his deep voice was in her body too.

"Will you mind living on the other side and leaving the people here?"

Her mind was dazed. She had to come back from a long distance to hear the question properly and answer it.

She shook her head.

"I have a house there, and I will fetch you when it is ready. My cottage here is not good enough. If the mackerel come when I think, I will have the house ready soon."

They were silent again. Sheila felt herself opening to a great wave which bore in on her, filling her with a tide

on which floated tiny sparkling lights. If she could rest and make no effort, these lights would fasten themselves to her, grow steady, and merge into a single light, and she would see clearly something of great importance. These clear swift moments were as precious and as familiar to her as the opening and closing of a book.

Donough spoke, and all the lights went out. "I shall stay here tonight."

"At the farm?" she whispered.

"No. In the open. I have coverings in the boat." He was silent again, and she felt the question surging up in his blood. He asked it, his voice hoarse. "Will you stay with me?"

She was alone, bobbing about on the open sea, tossed by one wave, carried back by another. The voice that answered was not hers.

"Yes, I will stay."

He scrambled to his feet.

"The boat is below. I will not be a minute."

She sat alone, and saw, half consciously, the bruised grass trying to straighten itself where he had lain. The sky was all around her. The birds had become quiet, but she could hear every detail of his progress down to the boat, and as he returned.

He swung up into sight carrying a bundle of oilskins and a coarsely woven rug. He threw them on the ground. She had not moved.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head.

He stood awkwardly, towering above her, afraid to touch her, for she was so still. They were strangers. She looked up at him, and spoke, answering his thought:

"I feel as if I hardly knew you."

He was silent, longing for her, not knowing how to reach her. In the small hollow, the storm and noise in their blood became unbearable . . . Sheila stood up.

"I must go back," she breathed.

He half raised his arms, let them drop heavily to his sides. She was shocked. She had never seen him like this, in pain. Pity struggled in her face, but she was not strong enough to bear responsibility for him yet. She gathered all the strength she had.

"I will stay for a little while." She gave him a wraith of a smile, and his heart turned over. "Sit down," she said, and waited till he sat down before she sank beside him.

"I am not built for the way things change and yet stay the same," he said. "When you were little, I loved you one way. Then I went away and came back, and you had grown, and, though we were sometimes the same, I was shy with you. I went away again, and knew that I loved you. I feel that we are near each other, but being away has made a difficulty. Yet it is being away that made me know I loved you."

She was not ready; there was still a bridge to cross. She asked a question, knowing the answer before she spoke.

"You have been with other women?"

There was pain in his face, but he answered her honestly.

"With two or three, not many."

She shifted her position, looking out towards the rocky island.

"I would not wed a man that would leave me as my father left my mother."

He put his hand over hers. "I would not leave you."

"How can you say that, when you left the others?"

He was silent for so long, that she turned to look at him enquiringly. His face was a deep red. He would not look at her.

"If a man has a great need for one woman," he said at last, "and she is not by his side, he will be apt to take another, for he has made himself helpless in the hands of all women by having such a great love for the one."

Quite gently, she took her hand from under his. She could not think clearly when he was touching her.

"Is it that way for all men?"

He hesitated, then said simply, "I believe it is."

She gave a little sigh that made him look anxiously at her.

"If that is so, how can a woman know that she is loved truly?"

He got up on his knees, and lifted her, and held her against him.

"She should know," he said between clenched teeth. "If she gave her man a chance, she should know."

His wave of passion left him as suddenly as it had come, for Sheila was unresponsive in his arms, withdrawn and lifeless. He laid her down again on the grass.

"There will be no rest for me," he said heavily, "till you have your mind made up. I thought you belonged to me, but there is a change come over you."

She sprang to her feet.

"I will not stay here," she cried, and tried to push past him, but he seized her wrist.

"Listen to me. Are you coming with me, or are you not? Give me your answer now, and I will abide by it."

Tears pricked her eyes, but she forced them back.

"I am not," she retorted. "You are hard, like Owen. You will give me no time to know my own mind. You go away and sail the seas, and see hundreds of women, and make up your mind as slowly as you like; but you will not give me any time at all. How am I to know? What men have I seen but you?"

"There is Mr. Heron for you."

She flushed fiercely. "You are right, there is Mr. Heron. Why should I not choose in my own time between him and you?"

She trembled at the fury in his eyes.

"And has he asked you? Will he ever ask you? No," he cried triumphantly, piercing the dismay at the back of her mind. "He has shown no liking for you beyond a smile or a word or two, the way he would throw money to a man begging at the door. Can he make love?" He felt instant relief as he watched her face. "He has no concern for you, but for the one who cooks his food and cleans his house for him. What if his friends came down here? Have you asked him is he married? You would look a great fool if he brought down a fine handsome wife with rich town clothes on her. How can you care about a man you know nothing of? And a poor sickly weed of a man at that?"

She blazed out at him, stamping her foot. Before she could answer, he had seized her round the waist, and his head was crushed against her.

"Don't listen to me, don't listen to me at all! God forgive me, what have I been saying? I will give you all the time you need. I do not know, I do not know." He raised an agonised face to her. "Sheila! Tell me for God's sake. Is it him you want, and not me at all?"

She looked down at him, swaying. He got up. "I will bother you no more. Maybe, later on . . ."

"No!" She seized his arms, her eyes staring, and thrust herself up against him. "Take me away now, take me in your boat and we will never come back. I will be a good wife to you, I swear it. Elizabeth will give me a wedding gown."

He released himself from her grasp.

"Are you weak in the head?" he cried. "Where would I bring you, with the house not ready, and with no word said to Owen?"

She was at him again, clutching the rough woollen sleeves.

"Stay here with me, don't leave me. If you go from me now, I will never see you again! I will do anything you like if you will stay with me."

She threw herself against him and his arms, rigid at first against his sides, moved slowly up to hold her. He said brokenly, "You are tired; it is wrong of me to be troubling you. You must go back and rest."

He tried gently to detach her hands, but she clung more tightly. He felt his blood mounting, and with a groan he lifted her and held her tight against him, lowering himself to the ground. He was searching for words to comfort her, when with a swift movement she pressed against him, and at her sudden nearness he was helpless, breathless, fighting with the streams of delight that coursed through his body.

"You are true, you are true! If you were once mine, you would be true for ever. But if he took you first——"

He groaned, and laid his cheek against hers. The touch inflamed his tortured senses, and his will-power left him in a hot stream of desire. He leaped, and rolled on top of her, pressing hard against her. Then he lifted himself on his elbow, and flung himself back from her, crying out in agony,

"No, no! It is a sin! You are too young . . . the priest . . ."

Something cold hit Sheila. The world fell away in icy desolation. She was lying at the bottom of a well. She had no body, only a desolation, a cold emptiness.

His face was on hers, he was babbling hot words, telling her to wait only a little while, to wait until he was ready, till

he had the house: sobbing that he wanted her as he had never wanted a woman, but it would not be right to take her now: she was an orphan, she had no one to protect her, God would not forgive him.

She heard it all, meaningless as the babbling of water. There was nothing. He had failed her. There was nothing, nothing anywhere. She was dead.

After an age of death, she opened her eyes. He was leaning over her, his face dim in the dusk, drawn and solemn, full of consternation.

"Sheila, my darling, I have frightened you. You are so pale."

Smiling to hide the depth of her disappointment, she put out a hand and touched his face. She felt very old. He was once more the child with whom she had played: but she was a child no longer, she would never be a child again.

They got up without speaking. He pulled his jersey straight, and said, "I will talk to Owen and tell him my plans."

The words meant nothing to her, but her uncle's name started a thought. She said suddenly,

"I have lost my pictures."

He stared at her. "Lost them—how?"

"John has taken them."

"John? What would he want with them? Why would John bother about pictures?"

As she hesitated, she saw John's face, dark, cunning, inhumanly watchful.

"He knows they are worth a lot of money. David told me to guard them carefully, because if I wanted to sell them, I could be very rich."

"You?" He caught her arm and raised his voice. "Why are they worth money?"

"David said my father was a great painter, and people would pay anything for a painting of his."

He stared at her, his astonishment tinged with fear.

"It is not true. Why did he tell you these things? He had no right. I will go to him and tell him so."

She shook her head wearily.

"No, you are wrong. He was trying to help me. I told him I had no money and no clothes." She saw his face darken, and went on quickly. "Talk to him if you must, but not now. And be careful. He gets angry very easily, and he thinks we are all unfriendly to him." Suddenly she gripped his arm. "Take him out in the boat again. He likes it, and, if he is enjoying himself, you can talk to him."

He glowered at her suspiciously. "You are very anxious to please him."

She shook her head. "You don't understand."

His mouth hardened. "Well, I will ask him in the boat, if you wish it. I want to talk to this Mr. David Heron."



## VII

THERE WAS A thunderous knock on the outer door. David, sitting by the window, leaned out and called, "Come in." He could not see who his visitor was; the wall of the little porch hid the door.

A heavy, rubbery tread sounded in the passage, and Donough stood in the sitting-room doorway. The two men looked at each other.

"Oh, it's you? Good evening."

"Good evening."

Donough's voice was deep and not unfriendly. David pointed to a chair.

"Come in. Sit down."

"Thank you."

The huge frame was lowered carefully. The chair creaked.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you the other night. Taking my fish," he added, as Donough's brows rose in enquiry.

"Your fish?"

"Yes! My fish. I rent the rights in the river."

"Oh. I did not know that. Still," Donough smiled good-naturedly, "there is plenty of fish in it for us all."

"I gathered that was your view."

"Who told you?"

"Sheila."

The room sprang to life. Each man was aware of the other in a new way.

Donough's face became grave. "I wish to speak to you about Sheila," he said.

"You will get little news of her from me, I'm afraid. I've hardly seen her. She has not been here for days on end."

"You are sure?"

"Of course I am sure," snapped David irritably. "I could hardly fail to notice, could I?"

Donough knit his brows. "I don't understand that," he said.

"Neither do I."

The space grew narrow between them.

"She did not tell me she had not been with you," Donough said at last.

His perplexity was so frank, and he was so absorbed in it, that David's irritation softened.

"Well," he said, "you are at full liberty to ask her. I'm sure that she will confirm what I say. I remember our last conversation perfectly, and so, I expect, does she."

"Did you quarrel?"

"Not at all. Almost the last thing she said to me was to complain that her pictures had been stolen."

Donough nodded slowly. "You told her they were worth money?"

David got up and began to walk up and down the room.

"I did. This is important. It is as well for me to speak to you about it, since I cannot get her to take it seriously. These pictures may be worth a very large sum. I know practically nothing about painting, but I know that they will take the world by storm. What would rouse it still more would be if Seager's daughter suddenly turned up with the missing pictures in her hand. News with a human interest."

Seeing the other's dismayed bewilderment, he went on,

"Wake up, man! This isn't a little peasant girl you have got amongst you. This is the daughter of Joseph Seager, the

world-famous painter. An original thinker, if ever there was one, and, what's rarer, a man balanced enough to live his life exactly as he wished. Here," he crossed to a bookshelf and pulled out the volume. "Read about him. A man seemingly full of superstition and credulous as a baby, but a man who did just what he wanted to. A man who could talk about himself as if he were a specimen in whom Joseph Seager were interested. Oh, you must read it. It will do you good. He's outside himself all the time, this man is. He records what he thinks and feels and does, with surprise, or appreciation, or bare tolerance."

Donough had risen. He was standing by the table.

"I will not read the book, Mr. Heron. The man was a bad man, to leave Mary and her little child. I do not wish Sheila to know about him: her own folk never speak of him at all. Why should you come down here and make trouble with us? There was no trouble till you came. I would be pleased if you would let us alone."

He spoke with a dignity that had no personal enmity in it, but his words burned David's flesh like sparks.

"Let you alone? By all means. Did I ask you to come in here? Did I ask any of you to come? Why did you force your way in like this? Trying to get something out of me, and then turning on me when I make you face the facts." In spite of his efforts, his voice shook. "Perhaps now you will be kind enough to go."

Donough made a movement towards the door, but it opened before he could reach it, and Sheila blocked his way. David gave a short bark of laughter.

"You see," he said to Donough. "You see what happens. Your picture of me as a meddler is very convenient, but there's no truth in it. Hardly a day passes but I am interfered with by one or other of you people. It has been better

lately: till you came and stirred up the hive. Meddle with you! It's all the other way round."

Donough was staring at Sheila, but she ignored him and came to David.

"I could not come before. Owen would not let me. He made me swear I would never speak to you again. If he finds I have been here tonight, he will kill me."

David clutched his head in his hands.

"Good God above! What is all this melodrama about?"

Before she could answer, Donough broke in loudly. "There, Mr. Heron. Now do you see what you have done? I tell you, we were at peace here till you came and disturbed everything."

Sheila turned on him. "How do you know if we were at peace, when half the time you are away on the mainland? You know nothing about it."

His jaw dropped open in astonishment. Stung by the pain in his face, she turned to David and stamped her foot.

"Oh," she cried. "Why must there be all this fighting and squabbling? Why are you two enemies? I will not have it, I will not *have* it, do you hear?"

David shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm perfectly prepared to be friends with him or anybody else. It was he who came and complained."

She looked at Donough. "You are not to quarrel, do you hear? You are to be friends." She caught his sleeve. "Donough—take us out in your boat. Take us out together, now."

As the big man stared down at her wonderingly, David remembered the dream which she had told him. Once more, he was aghast at the simple workings of her mind.

Gently, Donough put his arm around her shoulders.

"Come," he said. "I think it will be better if we go back to the farm."

She shook her head.

"You do not know, Donough. You see one side only. Mr. Heron was kind to me. He told me about my father, and explained many things I did not know. No, David, don't interrupt me, please. I must tell him."

Donough dropped his arm from her shoulders. She looked at him earnestly.

"He wished to help me, to give me books and clothes. Not one of you others minded about me like that. Oh, I know you would do things for me too, Donough, but that is different. We have known each other for so long a time. But he was kind to me when I was a stranger to him, a country girl who knew nothing. He wished to do things for me and there was no way I could repay him, and then Owen would not let me speak to him or see him."

All this time the two men had been staring into each other's eyes. David, touched though he was, embarrassed to the point of shame to hear her make much of what had been so little, found his eyes held by the other's steady gaze.

Sheila pulled at Donough's arm.

"Will you take us out in your boat, both of us? Please."

Slowly, Donough's stare softened. You must, his eyes said to David. We both must, for she is little more than a child.

David smiled, and answered for Donough: "I should like to come."

In complete silence, the three made their way down to the bridge and over the neck of the promontory. It was a still, fine evening. A low murk of cloud to the west hid the sun, but all above was full of the dying light. On shore, the light was tricky. One saw an object with unnatural distinct-

ness, but could not tell whether it was far off or near, and finally almost stumbled over it.

As they climbed, rabbits shot away from their feet in different directions. Donough strode on first, leaving the other two together with that grave and careless courtesy which came as natural to him as his swinging gait. Sheila wore no shoes: the dew was delicious against her feet.

They came down on the sand and walked across to the place where Donough had moored his boat. The tide had risen since, and with a brief word to them, he waded out to get it.

Standing beside Sheila at the water's edge, David was oppressed with the need to say something, but could not find words. He raised his head to scent the air, looking around him. The mountain was slowly gathering clouds, pulling down to it the darkness of the eastern sky.

Donough reached the boat, and with a thrust of the oar against the sand brought it gliding in to their feet.

"It only wants your friend from the cave to come and moo at us," said David, "to make the party complete."

Donough's face showed his distaste. He stretched out a hand to Sheila, who skipped neatly in. David clambered in, unaided. Donough motioned them both to stay in the stern, and, with slow effortless strokes, took the boat out over the still water. Turning, they watched the sand recede, and the mountain grow behind it. A little chill breeze came across the water. There was a light in one of the windows of the farm.

"Where are you going?" Sheila asked.

"Wherever you like," replied Donough. "To the near island?"

They went on in silence, the boat's motion hypnotic over the gleaming surface. The horizon had disappeared now,

and dusk was coming up fast. All the light in the world was on the sea. Sheila trailed a hand in the cold water. David sat huddled in a trance, and could not have said whether it took them two minutes or twenty to reach the island.

They came up to the small lagoon. There were curious white specks on the darkness of the rocks ahead, and David, peering, saw that they were sleeping birds. Looking over the side, he had a dim nightmare glimpse of rock and weed slanting up to meet them.

"The tide is too high. Will you come in over the rocks, or shall we go round to the far side? It makes a longer walk on the rocks."

David shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't ask me. This is your expedition."

For answer, Donough stepped carefully out on the rock, balancing himself with astonishing delicacy for so large a man. He held out his other hand to Sheila, who climbed into the bows. Donough, leaning his thigh against a jutting piece of rock, held out his arms. Sheila jumped, and he swung her up as if she had been a baby, and stepped off the rock into the water, which rose almost to the top of his rubber boots. He waded, still carrying her, up to the silvery shingle. There he set her down, and turned back.

David had climbed into the bows and was eyeing the rock. If he got on to it, he could jump to a smaller one, and then to the shore.

"Wait a while," sang out Donough, "and I will carry you in on my back."

For answer, David sprang. He alighted on the rock, jumped to the smaller rock, lost his balance, and floundered into the water. He managed to keep his feet, but was wet to the thigh. He made light of it coldly, and suggested that they should go on.

"There's a cave here," Donough said to him. "I will show it to you."

He pulled three candle-stumps from his pocket and handed one each to David and Sheila.

"I will go first," he said.

The way led, over the shingle, up a patch of scanty grass, and on to rock again. The light was treacherous now. It was hard to see where one was going. The rock rose sharply to a peak, and just short of it, Donough bore to the right and halted at a narrow cleft.

Sheila, agile as a monkey, had been close after him. Heavy breathing told her that David was not far behind. She dared not look back, for his eyes had been angry when he slipped in the water. It would humiliate him to look at him. The place was difficult. Donough ought to have told him what it would be like.

"We will light the candles now."

They lit the tiny flames. The air was so still they did not quiver. Donough, stooping, slipped through the cleft. As David hesitated, Sheila put out her hand, took his, and drew him after her.

The roof of the cleft came down. They had to bend double, then suddenly found that they could stand upright. Donough had halted a little to one side. At first they saw only a slippery, shapeless vault. Water trickled on its surface, which gleamed back wickedly at the candle flames. Then, following the gleaming slope of the wall down to the level of their feet, they saw a dark hole; and as their eyes became used to the darkness, the void into which they were peering, from being a basin in the rock, welled outwards till they had to strain their eyes about to find its boundaries. There, far below them, lay the sea, still, deep, evilly shining. Sheila leaned forward, candle in hand, and was instantly gripped



by Donough and pulled back. David drew a penny from his pocket, and jerked his hand forward. There was a pause before they heard the tiny splash.

"Is it not strange," said Donough, his voice little above a whisper, echoing hugely in the space, "how so small a light can show so far?"

"How deep is it?" asked David.

Donough shook his head. "They say it has no bottom."

"What do you mean?"

"They say it is not a cave in the rock of the island. It is a hole right through. If you sank a line in it, you would touch nothing till you reached the very bottom of the sea."

Sheila shuddered. "That is not a nice thought," she said.

"It is a very secret place," said Donough. "You would not see it from the outside, if you did not know where to go."

"That's true."

"It would be a good place for a murder, would it not? You would bring in here the person you wished to kill, and give him a push. He could never climb up these smooth walls. And then, when he drowned, he would sink, and come out underneath the island and be carried away by the currents and the tides and washed up some place miles away, and no one the wiser."

His voice, after he had stopped speaking, seemed to reverberate in the hollow space with sinister echoes. A chill crept up David's spine. He realised that he was utterly in Donough's power. What if the pair of them had lured him there to be rid of him? No one had seen them go. Donough had but to pick him up—he would be helpless in those enormous arms. A brief struggle, a cry, a splash—and two figures climbing quickly back across the rocks to their boat, whispering to one another, with none to tell the tale.

It all rose sharply in his mind as bile in the throat. Then he recollected that he could only be a couple of yards from the exit. He had but to dash out, and get into the open, where at least he could put up some sort of a struggle.

He set his teeth savagely. No, he told himself. I will not be bullied. Though his heart was beating hard, though waves of terror were flowing up and down his back and his limbs, though the air was roaring in his ears, he held on with sheer obstinacy, for ten, for twenty seconds.

Then he allowed himself to glance at Donough. Donough was bending forward, holding up the candle and staring into the depth with the earnestness and awe of a child. A violent backwash of sanity flowed over David. This man was no murderer, nor was Sheila the sort to see murder done upon the man she tended.

Realising how mad his impulse of panic had been, David felt yet another. What state must he be in, for his nerves to be jumping this way and that like a cracker? Humiliated, he contracted in dislike of himself.

He straightened up.

"I'm going out," he said. "It's cold in here."

As he turned to grope his way, he was seized once more by panic. For a moment he was a small boy again, sent by his father to fetch something from the study table. The study was in darkness. Rather than light the gas, which popped and frightened him, he felt his way across the room with outstretched hands, found the tobacco-tin, turned towards the door, and with all his will-power just avoided running as the darkness came together exultantly behind him.

He stooped, went through the opening, and emerged to the rocky platform. It seemed daylight by comparison. Close to the rock the sea was shadowed, but alive with silent, indefinable movement. Further out, it caught the

light from the sky, and stretched in glimmering floors to the regions of soft haze where it was lost.

David turned as the others joined him.

"Is there any history of that place being used in the way you said?" he asked.

Sheila looked up quickly at Donough. It was an instinctive movement, the way a child looks up proudly at its father, knowing that he can provide the answer that is sought.

"There is no certain history of such a thing," Donough said, "but David Ryan says he has seen a terrible thing here."

"When?"

"Not seen it *when* it happened," Donough explained. "He has the two sights."

"Donough means he sees things which happened before," Sheila put in quickly.

"Oh, second sight." David felt something in him harden in distaste, but he went on, "What did he see?"

Donough shook his head. "He will not say. But he says it was something terrible."

"He seems to have got his reputation rather easily."

"Oh, no," Donough assured him earnestly. "He has the two sights right enough. He is a queer man, is David Ryan. Why, the very house he lives in—but for the two sights, he would not be in it at all."

"How was that?"

"David Ryan lives on the mainland, on the big estate that belongs to the O'Dowds. He did a great service to old Sir Thaddeus—Sir Thady, we used to call him.

"There had been talk of moving David from his cottage, but he was very fond of it and did not wish to go. So when Sir Thady asked him what would he like as a reward for his service, he said it would be to stay in his cottage, and never

to move till he was taken out of it feet foremost. Sir Thady laughed, and granted him that.

"But presently, after a few years, old Sir Thady died. His one son had been killed fighting the Boers, and the man who inherited the estate was a cousin, who had lived away in foreign parts and never seen the place at all."

Donough broke off, as a flight of ducks, in formation like the head of a great arrow, sped by overhead. The silence was filled with the intense whirr of their wings.

"That was a sad thing, there being no son to inherit, and the whole country was very sorry for it. But the new heir, when he came, was not a bad sort of a man, not a bad sort of a man at all. True, he did not know the place nor the people, but he was a friendly man and he did his best to learn and tried to make improvements.

"One of the improvements he tried to make was David Ryan's cottage. He did not think it a fit place or a proper place for a man to live. Besides, David Ryan was paying no rent.

"So the O'Dowd sent for David Ryan, and told him that he was going to put him out of his cottage.

"Ah, don't do that," said David, "don't do that. Your cousin, old Sir Thady, said that I should never be put out of my cottage till I was carried out of it feet foremost."

"I can't help that," said the new heir. "Your cottage is not a fit place, and you are paying no rent, and you must go out of it."

"David pleaded and made great entreaties, but it was no use. The O'Dowd was hard in his plan, and he sent David away.

"So that night David went up to the graveyard, where old Sir Thady is buried. He threw himself down on his face upon the grave, and caught hold of the earth in his

arms and hugged it, and put his mouth down to the earth.

“‘Sir Thady, Sir Thady,’ he said, ‘the new heir, your kinsman, is going to put me out of my cottage that you promised I should keep for the whole length of my life. Oh, Sir Thady, listen to me, now. Don’t let him do this thing. Don’t suffer him to put me out.’

“David lay there for some time, not minding the wet and the rain, and then he had a great feeling of contentment in himself, and went back to his cottage.

“Two days later, or maybe it was three days, the new heir sent for David Ryan to go to him. ‘I have been thinking over what we were saying the other day,’ says he to David, ‘and I have changed my mind. I will not put you out of your cottage. You shall stay there, the way old Sir Thady said, till you are carried out feet foremost.’

“When he heard this, David Ryan fell down on his knees and kissed the O’Dowd’s hand many times over. As he was going out of the door, still calling out his thanks and his praises of the O’Dowd’s kindness, the O’Dowd called him back.

“‘Old Sir Thady,’ he said to him. ‘He had a red face, had he not, and a stammer in his speech? And a little scar just over his eye?’”

Donough stared gravely at David.

“By those words, you see, David knew that old Sir Thady had heard his complaint, and had come and appeared to the new heir and had interceded for him.”

David had been listening to this story, his mind wriggling to and fro between acceptance and derision. The moment Donough finished, the words sprang to his lips that the whole thing was nonsense, and that the simple explanation was that the new heir had seen a portrait of old Sir Thady,

or had simply been talking with other tenants. But he checked the words. To utter them would be like disappointing a child. Donough's belief in the story was obviously earnest and whole-hearted. So earnest, so whole-hearted, that David's impulse to explain it away was partly in self-defence.

His wet trouser suddenly felt cold against his leg. He turned impatiently, and Donough, with immediate response to his mood, headed towards the boat. Scrambling and slithering over the rocks—it was perceptibly darker now—they made their way slowly down till they reached the shingle.

As they stepped into the boat, David turned to Donough.

"Do you mind if I take an oar to keep me warm?"

There was a sickly glow above the shoulder of the mountain. The moon was trying to force its way up through the cloud. Heading straight towards it, the two men made the boat skim over the silent water. So as not to shame himself by comparison, David pulled furiously. His efforts were not lost on Donough, who, easily answering them, kept tactful watch and, when the other's unaccustomed muscles began to protest, eased off his own stroke to match.

Suddenly Sheila leaned forward and pointed to one side.

"Go that way," she cried.

Donough looked over his shoulder, smiled, and, with a powerful stroke, swung the boat off its course. Across their path the sea was thick with resting birds, a giant flock of gulls floating bemused, vague through the gloom, like a waste of large, white pebbles. The boat was bearing into the midst of them—and it seemed to Sheila that a familiar tune was playing in her ears, a melody she could not properly remember. For half a minute the birds drifted, still and unaware. Then it seemed as if the surface of the water lifted into a great, white cloud, which broke and soared

into the darkness. At the same time, the air was filled with a wild calling and a beating of wings, as the white shapes rose, thrown up above them in huge handfuls till they faded, the cries died, and the cloud dispersed, leaving the water bereaved and bare.

The boat swung back upon its course, and Sheila smiled into David's face, for she had caught the tune, and knew why and how she had lived this instant before.

## VIII

DAVID STARED GLOOMILY through his bedroom window, and gave up all hope of a bathe. He could see nothing at all through the glass save dribbling rivers of rain. The noise of the rain on the roof varied from a steady purring to a sound of almost frightening volume, as if heaven had lost control, and could hold up its load no longer.

He dressed, went downstairs, and opened the front door. A dead chill struck him, the exhalation of cold, spilling water. The scene was utterly forlorn. Where the sky was visible at all, torn rags of cloud with dangling tails subsided desperately, and the rain swilled down as from enormous goatskins. It did not fall, it was flung down, and the earth, writhing under the blow, refused to receive the water, and threw it up. On every flat space it gathered ominously, and the track outside the gate was a river, broken by exposed stones.

The sea was a shadow; there was no promontory, even the end of the garden was blurred. His isolation was complete.

With a grimace, he shut the door and set to work to light his fire. There was plenty of wood, though it was damp, and spat and crackled. Everything was damp: the walls of the house oozed a deathly chill, and made him wonder what it could be like in winter.

The damp was invading his body. His right shoulder was stiff, and there was a dull pain in the joint of his



knee. He grunted as he straightened to his feet from the fire.

"I shall be as bad as that old Peadar," he said.

What was the use of doctors? They couldn't even deal with rheumatism. They looked self-important, they smiled glossily, they used long words, and the simplest things baffled them.

The kettle boiled over, and in a burst of anger he seized the handle and set it down with a jerk that caused some drops from the dancing lid to splash upon his hand. He stood quite still, staring down at his scalded hand, as if the sight of the hurt flesh gave him actual satisfaction. Then he made tea doggedly, tightening his lips, in spite of himself, as the burned hand met the warmth of the fire. He would have liked to grumble because Elizabeth was not there, but he could hardly expect her to turn out in such a deluge.

When his meal was ready, he looked distastefully round the kitchen, gathered up the things on a tray, and carried it into the sitting-room. Here the fire, which he had lit on coming down, was hissing, but burning brightly.

He was glad of the tea, but could not eat. Such small morning appetite as he had was whipped up by his bathe, which this morning he must do without.

Why did that fellow come here last night, he thought, and why do I like him? It's easy for him. He is simple, all of a piece, he doesn't have to wrestle with himself. There would be no wars if there were more people like him, though he would fight to the death if he had to fight. It's men like me who make wars; though we have ten times the sensitiveness, and hate war.

He put down his cup and saucer, and went over to the window. Flinging it open, he leaned out, feeling the damp

air pour upon his forehead. The rain was falling heavily, but the mist seemed to be lifting. He could see the slope of the bank beyond the gate. Then he jerked his head and peered into the gray wetness. He thought he had heard something splash, different from the splash of the rain.

Elizabeth! Poor old hen—she should not have come out in this. He carried his tray into the kitchen, and waited for her at the back door. Just when he was beginning to wonder what had happened, the porch door opened, and he heard her panting and giving little groaning sighs. He hurried back, and found her there, with water pouring from her, squelching out of the sides of her old black boots, and making a pool on the stone floor. She had nothing to protect her from the rain but a large thick shawl, from which her face peered, dripping and distraught.

At sight of him, she broke into so confused a gabble that he could hardly understand. He listened, frowning, trying to make out her drift.

“Do you mean to say he has been out all night?”

She nodded several times, loosening the shawl and clasping her hands excitedly.

“Have you looked for him? He hasn’t a chance if he has been out all night in this. Did you want me to go and help look for him?”

“No, no!”

She shook her head again violently. Peadar had been found, she told him. Kate’s two dogs had found him, but she could get no help.

“What about your brothers?”

Her face altered, and he saw with astonishment that she was ashamed. “Something is wrong at the farm,” she said.

“Why? What is wrong?”

She avoided his eye, and muttered what sounded like "There has been drinking."

With a pang of compassion, he realised the extremity which had made her come to him for help. He got his macintosh and hat, and set out with her. The rain was like nothing he had ever experienced. Before he had reached the gate, it was running in cold rivulets down his neck and on his shins. There was a great pool outside the gate, and some of the farm ducks were disporting themselves in a delirium of joy.

"Do you get flooded here?" he shouted to Elizabeth.

The old woman did not grasp his meaning at once, then she nodded. It took her all the time to struggle along, under the sodden weight of her clothes, but she did not flag, and David, his head down, his shoulders hunched, followed her.

The soft clouds rushed across, and a wall of water filled the space between sea and sky. Where the pair stumbled and splashed along, there were no landmarks, and they seemed to be moving in a colourless, meaningless space. For what seemed a long time, they proceeded dully. David was now soaked to the skin, the sopping trousers clinging against his legs. He noticed at last that they had reached Peadar's path of stones. The mist was thicker here, and Elizabeth, a few yards in front, moved like an uneasy shadow. Instinctively, he caught up with her.

Then she stopped, and he saw a curious sight. Two motionless shapes, with the outlines of squatting dogs, but looking far larger, faced him heraldically, one on each side of the path. He peered, and flinched, as the strange set piece broke, and a shape came leaping from the obscurity. It was one of Kate's dogs, whiningly begging assistance from Elizabeth. The other did not stir.

Seeing that they were prepared to follow, the dog turned and trotted ahead, barking on a high note of distress. Elizabeth drew aside and let David pass her. He picked his way carefully, and it was well he did, for he nearly tripped over something which lay across the path. Dashing the water from his eyes with the back of his hand, he looked down, and saw the body of Peadar. It lay on its back, its face turned up to the heavens in flood, the eyes grey, unseeing pools, water trickling from the corners of the open mouth. One outstretched hand grasped a stick, the other was clenched around a heather root.

David bent down and tried to detach the hand that was holding to the heather. He put his fingers to the wrist, knowing that it was of no avail. Then he peered up at Elizabeth through the rain.

"He has been dead some hours."

She stared down at him, her mouth falling open, and let loose a flood of words, a mixture of Irish and English. From what he could make out, she was bidding him make Peadar well again and able to walk. He shook his head.

"He is dead," he repeated.

She screamed at him then, her eyes blazing with accusation. He stood, calm, the rain running down his chest and stomach inside his clothes. He felt vaguely that something should be done, but the schooled, disciplined side of him that felt it was remote and perfunctory.

To the rest of him it seemed better to let Peadar lie where he was, and be carried away by a world in flood and washed into the sea.

He pulled himself together, and, as from a long way off, heard himself speak to the old woman.

"Go and get Owen." He entirely refused to believe that Owen could be drunk. "We will carry him to my house."

What liberties could be taken with the dead, he thought. They could carry poor Peadar to the house whose doors he would never darken while he lived. He would be borne by his enemy over his enemy's own threshold.

Elizabeth was vehemently refusing. Peadar should be taken to his own home. They could do that between them, for it was near. He should be laid out properly upon his bed, and later they would put him in the field beside his cow.

It was so reasonable that he only nodded. Looking down at Peadar, he wondered if he could manage to carry him alone. The old woman would be no help. Poor old soul, she could hardly struggle along as it was.

As he considered, an inhuman screech bubbled through the rain. Turning in horror, he saw a huddled form, with outstretched arms, come through the mist almost as if it were flying. It made straight for him, and he started back as Kate pushed by, dropped on the ground beside Peadar, and thrust down her old beaky face upon his, wailing and screeching like a cat in torment.

Elizabeth stiffened. The shawl fell from her, her hands went rigid like claws. Uttering a throaty growl, she flung herself on Kate, fastened her hands round the bared neck, tore her away with a galvanised jerk, and began to batter her head upon the ground. Kate's screeches sharpened madly, and to the clamour was added the wild yelping of her dogs, which circled round the two struggling figures, snapping, snarling, and worrying.

David felt his eyes big in his head. Then, without willing it, he seized Elizabeth by the shoulders, and was shaking her with all his strength, trying to get her away. It was a nightmare in which he struggled madly to disentangle a pair of frenzied witches.

What followed was even madder. Elizabeth let go Kate suddenly, and turned and clawed at his face with talon-like nails. With horrible agility, like a bat rising after a blow, Kate got to her feet. Elizabeth spoke rapidly in Irish, nodding towards him. Kate leaped up and down, pointing and screeching, and he saw the two united against him in a frenzy of hatred.

From their gesticulations, he realised they were bidding him begone. As he hesitated, Kate called to her dogs, and hooshed them at him with a swinging gesture of both her arms. He had just time to see her overbalance with the effort, and fall on her face, when the yelping brutes sprang at him, and he was trying to fight them down. He turned to run, and they ran by his sides, leaping and snapping. Then Kate's shrill voice called them back, and he was free.

He turned his head, to see the two old women, vague in the rain, standing together and watching him. Then he hastened home, shivering and stumbling, his mind boiling in confusion. Twice he stopped and tried to vomit, but could not.

The weight of beating water was taken from his shoulders: he slammed the door and stood panting in the hall. For more than a minute he remained there, confused, trying to regain his senses. One of his hands streamed blood, where the dog had bitten him. The thought crossed his mind that they were filthy-looking curs, and he went to the kitchen to wash the wound.

In the doorway, he started back in astonishment. The light was lit, the fire burning brightly, the room tidy—and by the range stood Sheila.

Her eyes widened as she saw his injured hand. She opened her mouth, shocked at the sight of his face.

He went over to the tap, turned it on, and held his hand beneath it.

"Any water on the boil?"

"No, but it will not be a minute."

She moved rapidly.

"There is a small bag upstairs in my bedroom, underneath the window. Bring it down, would you?"

She was back almost at once, and handed it to him, still silent, looking at him with scared eyes. Fiercely he splashed iodine on the wound. It was the hand he had scalded, and the pain, flaming up his arm, gave him a grim satisfaction.

Sheila, seeing him whiten, whispered, "Does it hurt?"

"Stings for a minute. Now: be useful."

Under his directions, she bandaged the hand roughly but securely. He leaned back in the chair, water streaming from his clothes. When he spoke, his voice was almost dreamy.

"I thought, if I had been younger, I could have fitted in here. Now, I don't know. Why is it they treat me as a leper? You get strangers here often."

"That's different," she said. "They come in August. There are always several of them, and they keep to themselves."

"They go into the farm, and talk to your uncles. I know they do. Seton told me."

"It is different."

His head was spinning round. He stood up, holding on by one hand. She ran to him, and took the dripping macintosh and his coat.

"Get me a drink, will you?"

She poured out the whiskey and water in the amounts he liked, and handed him the glass. He drained it greedily.

Setting it down with a sigh, he looked round the room as if he were noticing things after a long absence.

"What are you doing here?"

"Do you feel better?" she prevaricated.

"I am all right. How is it you are here? Oh, yes." His voice strengthened. "What about Owen? Why wasn't he helping with Peadar?"

She hesitated, but answered frankly.

"He is in a black rage. Elizabeth was afraid to go near him. You see, John has been drinking, and Owen beat him."

"Beat him?"

"Yes. He would have beaten me, too, for going in the boat, only Donough was there."

David yawned. Then he remembered. "Do you know where John gets his liquor?" he asked.

"He goes to the town, when he has the money. But he hasn't been for a long while. I don't know where he got it this time: unless he had it by him."

"I know where he got it," said David grimly. "There are two bottles of my whiskey missing."

Sheila turned white. She came to him and caught his sleeve.

"If Owen knows that John has stolen from you, he will kill him."

David shrugged his shoulders. He was beginning to shiver.

"It would be no great loss, but you can make your mind easy. I shan't tell him. Well—if you are here, you'd better stay. I'm going in to get warm."

"You must change your clothes. I'll bring them down."

He went into the sitting-room, crouched over the fire, and held his hands to the flames. In half a minute she was down with an odd assortment of his clothes and a towel.



"Be quick," she said, "I will give you five minutes only. Then I shall come in; so you had better hurry."

Mechanically, he pulled off the wet clothes, and rubbed himself. The fresh clothes were damp, even though they had been in the chest of drawers. He stood naked, feeling the glow of the fire upon his skin, and holding the garments, one by one, close to the flames. Steam came from them, but speedily swirled away.

He put the clothes on, and his dressing-gown on top of them.

"You can come in," he called, and instantly the door opened. She had been waiting in the passage, much more than five minutes.

He sat down, and pointed silently to the other chair. She crouched on the edge of it, and nodded towards his hand, her eyes wide with question.

His lip curled. "It's a dog's bite, and probably a mad dog's at that."

He told her briefly about Peadar and the way the two old women had set upon him. She could hardly wait for him to finish.

"Elizabeth does not understand," she said earnestly. "She thinks that Peadar died, and his cow too, because you have come here. She is kind, and she would like you, if it were not that she thinks that a stranger at Kilree must bring ill-fortune upon us all."

"But why me, and not the summer visitors? That's what I can't understand."

She made a gesture of irritation at his obtuseness.

"The summer visitors come here at one time of the year. They fish and bathe and have picnics together. But you have come at a different time, to live amongst us."

"It's all nonsense."

"Elizabeth is kind," she repeated, "but she is terrible when she believes something. She can make it come true. She has done it this time, since you came. The cow died and Peadar died, and other things will happen."

"Rubbish. All the same, I had better go, or one of you will be having murder on his soul. You all hate me. It isn't only Elizabeth."

She dropped from the chair and kneeled up in front of him.

"I do not hate you. I would like to be near you and do things for you. They would like you too, if it were not that Kilree is cursed, and they are all afraid. Everything has gone wrong here. The people left the village, the fishing was lost, and there are evil spirits here now that try to drive us away too. They have got into Kate. You can hear her talking to them, many's the time." .

"Stop talking such superstitious nonsense. You must get away from all this, you know."

He rose to his feet, and went to the kitchen to get himself another drink. When he came back, she was still kneeling beside the fire.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "it isn't the place that makes them hate me. It's myself. I make everyone hate me. People always end by disliking me, no matter how friendly they have been at the start. You will do the same."

She shook her head violently, her eyes looking up at him, enormous in the firelight. He rested his glass on the mantelpiece.

"I have never quite known why it is," he said dispassionately. "It started when I was a child. I think my parents hated me. Each of them called me disloyal, but how can you be loyal to two people who disagree? Each of them kept trying to win me over. I only wanted them to be one,

so that I need not take sides. I was part of them both, and, if they were not one, I had to divide myself. I become two people, always at war: my father the good in me, my mother the bad."

"How do you know she was bad?" interrupted Sheila passionately. "How do you know? I was wrong about my father. You may be wrong too."

David folded his arms and began to walk quietly to and fro, as if he did not know that he was moving.

"My wife hates me," he said simply. "They all do."

"It is not true!"

"How do you know? You never saw her."

"You think she hates you because you think everyone does." She kneeled up straight, clutching his dressing-gown, and stopping him. "It is not true," she repeated. "You think nothing of me because I live here, and because I have no fine clothes. But if my father had taken me away with him, and if you had met me in a big town, perhaps you would listen to me then."

"Sheila." He touched her head. "I always listen to you. I talk to you as I have never talked to a living soul."

She lifted her eyes to him, and he shrank from the glow in them. She said,

"Does it not matter to you that I am happy with you and could never hate you? There are times when you seem to be nearer to me than anyone, nearer even than Donough. I know you better than I shall ever know him." She spoke with an authority that startled him. "I know you so well that I do not feel the need to speak to you: and you say things that I have said to myself many times. I have to explain to make Donough understand me, and sometimes he does not understand me even then. I think he is the most

wonderful man, and I would like to be like him. But I am not at all like him. I am more like you."

"God forbid," he exclaimed. "You are more straightforward and spontaneous than anyone I have ever met. You feel, and think, and speak as one person."

She looked at him wonderingly. "You talk as if that was strange. Don't other people? Doesn't your wife?"

"Yes," he answered slowly. "*She* does."

Her intent stare never varied. "What is she like?"

He made a little grimace. "She is beautiful," he said. "She is neat, and brown, and small, and exquisite. She never has a hair out of place. She is—polished, inviolable." He wrinkled his brow in the effort to explain. "She would never let me take her at a disadvantage. Do you know what I mean?"

She shook her head.

"Well, if I came suddenly round the bedroom door when she was not ready for me to come, she would be furious. She always has to choose how she will appear. Do you see?"

She nodded slowly. "She is not generous."

He struck his fist into his palm.

"You've got it! By God, you've got it! Mind you, *she's* generous enough in the common sense of the word. She'd give you the coat off her back—though you would probably find she had something more becoming on underneath it. But she never gives herself. She's always cool, and in command."

He started pacing again.

"She's the sort of woman," he burst out, "who, if you showed her the most beautiful scene in the world, would be peevish and wouldn't want to look at it if she thought the wind was disarranging her hair."

To his amazement, Sheila laughed.

"You are angry with her for being what she is. That is silly. You might as well be angry with a cat for not liking to be wet."

"That's—that's——" He stopped, at a loss.

"You cannot blame her for that," Sheila went on. "If you do not like that sort of woman, you should never have married her."

"True, Oh wise woman."

Her face showed hurt. "Why do you laugh at me?"

"I don't. I can't make you out. You seem to understand so much, and yet you can't possibly. You haven't the experience."

"I understand you—only you get angry, and then I do not understand you at all."

He smiled. "I am angry now, am I? You know, you're a child, Sheila. That's what it is. If I could go back twenty years, we could be wonderful friends."

She winced at the implication.

"I am not a child."

"Yes, you are. You know nothing about life and the way it breaks a person up into bits and tells him to act as if he were all of a piece. You haven't heard its voice. It says, 'You must hurry, rush, be a success. Make money, get on with things, don't waste time in dreaming.'"

"I do not see why you should do anything you do not want."

"That shows you don't know anything about it. They would get you too."

She sat very still, feeling what he said, but not understanding it. At last she asked: "Who are these people who want you to do things? Why must you obey them?"

"Don't ask silly questions. The world has no use for failures."

"But," she objected, wrinkling her brow, "no one minds a person doing what he wants to do, unless he bothers anyone else."

David laughed bitterly. "That's what your father said in one of his letters. Sounds so simple, doesn't it, to do what you like. What about the thousands with hardly enough to eat?"

Her face grew dark.

"Have you no money?"

He glanced at her angrily. "I have plenty for my own needs, thank you. I am talking of those who haven't."

She stared down at the floor, puzzled by the way in which he evaded the main issue. She leaned forward, and began to pile wood on the fire.

"With Donough I can say what comes into my mind, and it always sounds right. But when I talk to you, I cannot"—she paused, and her frown deepened—"I cannot get out what I want to say, and when I do, it seems stupid. But I like to be here with you," she added hastily, "I like to be in the house, and know you are in this room reading or writing. Have you written your book?"

"I have not."

"Why?"

For a moment he looked as if he were about to burst out angrily. Then he stretched and smiled.

"I'm getting old, I had rheumatism this morning, and yesterday, when I came into this room, I thought I saw Seton Masterman sitting in that chair."

"Kate sees people like that many a time."

"God, you think I'm going that way, do you?"

"No, no," she cried. "Why must you always take things up wrong?"

"I must get my eyes attended to. Headaches and optical illusions together are too much of a good thing." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "The evil spirits of Kilree must be getting at me."

She thought, This is when I like him. I wish he would stay like this.

She shivered, and he looked down at her in concern.

"Look here, what am I thinking of? You are soaking wet. What a selfish fool I am! It's your fault: You interest me so much that I forget everything else. Get upstairs and take it all off this minute."

She smiled at him.

"What shall I put on?"

"That ought not to worry you. You have made free with my clothes before this."

His eyes teased her, and suddenly her heart was so light that she skipped across the room.

"Sheila!"

She turned in the doorway, surprised.

"You have got lovely eyes," he said. "I meant to tell you that earlier on, but I was too much interested in what you were saying."

"Is that why you called me back?" she asked, her eyes dancing.

"Why, won't it do? As a matter of fact, I wanted to ask you what you have done with the dress you wore the first time I saw you."

"It is still here," she said diffidently. "But it must be rather crumpled now."

He laughed outright, startling her.

"Run along, and put it on, then come back and get warm. This blasted rain is getting heavier than ever."

She went into the kitchen and found her dress where it had been put away, stuffed into the corner of the cupboard. She shook out the crumpled skirt. Never mind; it was better than the one she had on.

Without a thought, she went upstairs, and let herself into David's bedroom. She stood inside the door, looking round interestedly. On the top of the chest of drawers were his brushes and comb; here, too, stood the mirror. It was tilted, so that she could not see. She pulled it to her level, and gasped when she saw her own face. What could David think of her? What on earth would Elizabeth say? There was mud on her face in little pinpoints, and one large smear. Her hair hung in rats' tails.

She looked round the room again. What a lot of bottles and tubes and soap and things there were on top of the wash-stand. She might wash here.

She slipped easily out of her rough, torn shoes, for they were too big for her, and gazed anxiously at her feet. They were well-shaped feet, uncramped, the toes wide apart, but she noticed only the mud-stains.

As she looked at them distastefully, a thought struck her, and she was off instantly, out by the door and into the one next to it. She had often seen the bathroom, but, before David came, the taps were too stiff to turn. Once when she had managed to screw one round, dark brown water trickled unappetisingly down the side, and made a track in the dusty enamel. There should be hot water now. She knew, for Elizabeth had showed her how to work the range so that water would be hot for the visitor.

She stooped down, fitted the plug, and turned the taps on. Water poured from both. It was brown, but it was clean, and looked lovely as it streamed powerfully into the bath.



Catching her breath in the exquisite daring of it, she slipped out of her clothes, and stepped over the side. The unaccustomed feel of the warm water made her shiver with delight. She sat down, tingling, forgetful of everything but her joy in the feel of the water on her weary, muddy limbs.

She did not waste time, but began to scrub her hands and feet, using David's nail-brush, which she found on the side of the bath. They looked quite nice, she was relieved to see, once they were clean. She did not linger in the bath, but dried herself quickly, using the nearest towel as unconcernedly as she used everything else, and was soon back in the bedroom.

The air was dank and chill. She shivered, clutching David's coat about her, and began to forage in the chest of drawers. Laughing and talking to herself at the unfamiliarity of the garments, she decided on a vest and a pair of pants. She knew what they were: John's and Owen's hung weekly on the line to dry.

The vest was too big, and the pants came a long way down her legs. She rolled them up high, and slipped into her mother's dress. It reached the ground, and fell in folds about her shoulders, but it was beautiful, and she felt happy.

Next, she took a comb and drew it through her hair. The damp locks sprang back and curled through her fingers. She combed them till they became little curls that rested on her neck and round her ears. She smiled at the shining-eyed brown-faced girl in the glass: then, gathering up her skirts, she ran down bare-foot to the room where she had left David.

Reaching the doorway, she uttered an exclamation. The curtain was drawn, and the fire was blazing. David was

on his knees, by the hearth, lifting a kettle from the fire. He spoke without turning his head.

"We are going to defeat the weather and the time of day. If it chooses to be wet and dark in the morning, we will say it's evening, and make ourselves comfortable. Come along, I have something here which will warm you up."

She came slowly across the room, watching him as if she feared a second miracle might take place, and his mood go as soon as it had come. She watched while he poured water into a saucepan, and squeezed in lemon-juice. The heat of the fire had brought colour to his face. His hair fell in curls over his forehead, and he was young, younger than Donough, young in an unearthly way, of which she was a little afraid.

He turned and looked up at her.

"Well, of all——" He jumped to his feet. "What *have* you done to yourself?"

She wriggled with delight.

"I just made myself more tidy."

He looked her up and down, and his lips twitched.

"Just a wee bit baggy at the waist, that's all. What can we do about that, I wonder. I know. Wait a moment."

He bounded across the room, and she heard him leaping up the stairs, three at a time. There was a sound of foraging in the bedroom, and he was back, carrying a belt.

"It's all made of elastic, just the colour for you. I'll give it to you as a keepsake. It's much too fine for me. Come here."

He passed the belt round her waist and buckled it.

"What can be easier? No holes, you see; the prong just sticks in the elastic. A sort of family affair, can be adapted to fit mother, father and offspring."

His hands rested on her waist; he looked down at the brown head rising from the stiff, old-fashioned dress. She met his eyes, and for once they were wide and shining. He bent his head, lightly kissed her forehead, then drew back and took his hands away. They smiled at each other like old friends, and immediately all uneasiness disappeared from the air, and they were both down on their knees by the fire, Sheila prattling about her bath, and David heating the drink over the fire.

"Try this," he said, handing her the glass.

She sniffed at it, wrinkling her nose.

"It smells very strong."

"Drink it up, like a good girl." He raised his glass to hers solemnly, and began to sip it. "This reminds me of camping one year down in Kerry. Seton was with me."

He stopped, his face alight and smiling, and drained his glass. Sheila was sipping hers.

"Do you like him very much?" she asked.

"Seton?" He considered. "He gets me out of all my messes, he's my father-confessor—or he thinks he is. He's coming down here soon."

"Shall I have to go if he comes?"

"He won't come. It's too cold and it's too wet. But there's no need for you to go, even if he does." He smiled again. "I would like to hear you two talking together. It would be an experience."

"I hate him," said Sheila unexpectedly.

"Why? What's he done?"

"Nothing to me."

"I thought he was very popular here."

She shook her head. "He does not know the people. He has made up his mind what people are before he meets them, so he never meets them at all."

He stared at her, a smile of delight slowly spreading over his face. Seeing him smile, she pouted obstinately.

"He would not talk to me. He would think I was silly, and knew nothing."

"He'd be right up to a point." He softened the words with a smile. "There are a lot of things you know nothing about, but you are not silly. Do you know what you are, Sheila? You are a sphinx."

"I don't know what that is," she answered with spirit, "but Dr. Masterman would be wrong if he said I knew nothing at all. I know lots about fishing and minding a farm, and I have read lots and lots of books."

"You have read?" he asked incredulously.

"I have."

"Where did you get the books?"

"The teacher lent them to me. I went to the school here till it was closed down. We all did. There were more of us then, eight altogether, who went from here. I liked the teacher better than the others, and she would keep me sometimes and talk after lessons were finished. She talked the way you do sometimes, and I would not always understand, but I liked to be with her and listen to her. She was so wise. She said the most wonderful things."

"Such as?"

She frowned and pressed her hands together, trying to select something.

"She said it was quite easy to die without hurting yourself. She said you had first to let go, and jump in your mind."

"Good God! It's a good job she has gone."

Her eyes flared.

"Don't you say a word against her. She was good and wise."

"All right, my dear. She told a child how to die easily, and she was good and wise. (Get on, drink up that stuff while it's hot.) You *are* the most morbid collection of people, down here. I never heard anything like it." He looked at her quizzically. "You aren't going to tell me that *you* want to die?"

She had obediently finished her drink, and the warmth of it floated into her cheeks, and made her eyes sparkle. She was looking into the fire, and missed the irony in his tone.

"I do not want to die, but I feel so quiet inside me that I think I could die easily."

It was some time before he could find words.

"How long have you felt like this?"

"Only since you came here." Not seeing his astonished stare, she went on: "I was not quiet before. I used to lie awake at night thinking about my father and wondering why he was not like other men. Nobody here would talk to me about him."

There was a long silence. "And now you feel differently?" David said.

She nodded. "You told me he was a very great painter, not like other men because of his work. I am not unhappy about him any more."

David reached for a cigarette, and lit it. He pulled on it for a moment before he spoke.

"This teacher—what did she teach?"

"Poetry and stories."

"Is that all? No science, no history?"

"It was what I wanted to know."

"I dare say; but it wasn't enough. If you know nothing of the great men of history, the great philosophers and scientists, you are not educated. You ought to get away to

school and learn. You have a good mind, but it's all one-sided."

Sheila's face had become obstinate. She said:

"I may not have read very much, as you say. I would like to know about these people, but I do not see that they have anything to do with what I was saying to you. They could not tell me anything more about myself."

"That's just where you are wrong. Scientists tell you all about yourself: how your body works, your nerve centres, and your brain, and why you believe such things as the superstitions you sometimes talk about."

She flushed, but answered calmly.

"They could only tell me about the things in which I am like other people. They could not tell me what makes me different. I can only find out about myself by watching the things that happen to me. A person has to believe what happens." She looked up at him defiantly. "*You* think you see people when they are not there, for all your knowledge."

"Yes. But I know how to account for it, and various other vain imaginings. What *you* are doing is setting up your own mind and your own perceptions as the standard of truth."

"I have not talked to you about anything I do not understand," she answered with dignity. "I only told you things about myself which I know are true."

She got up and went quietly towards the door, trailing her grotesque dress about her, with the belt he had so gaily fetched a quarter of an hour ago. The rain beat insistently on the window-pane.

"Sheila! Don't go away."

She turned slowly, making no attempt to conceal the tears in her eyes. He went to her but did not touch her.

"You must not take any notice of me when I speak like that." He hesitated: it was new to him to appeal to a human being. "You are the only friend I have now."

She looked into his eyes, watching for reassurance. Then she smiled and went back to her place by the fire.

"I couldn't have gone out anyway," she said contentedly.

He looked at her, half with suspicion, and a silence fell between them.

"We were talking about your friend, the school-mistress. Why did she give up teaching?"

"The school was closed. But it was not only that. She used to get ill all of a sudden. Once when she was talking to me, she stopped in the middle of what she was saying, and got quite stiff, and slipped off the chair on to the floor. She was sick, and she made noises like Kate's dogs. She rolled on the floor and growled and spat. She got better after a while, but she shivered and was so white that I was frightened. She asked me not to tell anyone, or she would be sent away, and she had nowhere to go."

She broke off, and her face twisted with such horror that David gripped her arm.

"My dear! It's all right. You're not with her now."

His own face had gone pale.

"But I have told you! I have told you what I have promised her I would never tell!" She looked at him with bewildered eyes. "Why did I tell you? It was just as if I was talking to myself."

She sprang to her feet and stood over him, the lines of her face hard.

"You must promise me now, you must swear never to tell anyone."

Dazed, he watched her peer round the room, searching. "You won't find a crucifix here," he said.

She wheeled round, turning frightened eyes on him. Then she went limp.

"It does not matter," she said dully. "I swore, and I broke my oath. I cannot make you keep yours. But I think I would kill you if you told."

"Don't be so melodramatic," he said harshly. "There isn't the slightest reason why I should repeat what you have told me. All the same, I'm glad the woman is gone. She might have harmed you in one of her fits." He began pacing up and down. "The more I hear, the more urgent it is that you should get out of this pestilential place."

It was her turn to be angry. He was the alien, and here he was, disposing of her life.

"I should like to travel and see great towns and people, but it does not matter as much as you say. I should not change if I went to another place. I should still be myself."

"That's where you are wrong." The edge on his voice was a warning which she would not heed. "You would become somebody else; several people; a great many responses to a great many stimuli."

Her face crumpled sulkily. "I cannot understand what you say. There is no place for me to go." She clasped her hands behind her back. "Why do you want to send me away? I have done you no harm."

"But, my dear child, it's for your own sake. I am only thinking of your good. You have the makings of a very good mind, but here it is all running to seed. You are superstitious, you follow your own instincts in everything, without questioning or doubting your motives. Worse than that, you make out that your instinct is a kind of higher control. That's an old game, my dear, and a very dangerous



one. What was it that brought you here to me that first night, all dressed up? Your higher control—or a primitive instinct?”

Little lights danced before Sheila's eyes, little globes of hate. She had never felt like this towards anyone before: helpless, yet knowing quite well that, if she could express herself, she could confute everything that he had said. She spoke with a passion that drove straight through his armour.

“You speak on purpose of things I do not understand, so as to belittle me. I have not learned the things you talk about, but I know things that you do not, and I am right when I speak about myself. If I did not do what I know in myself I must do, I would be nothing at all. Owen told me that my mother and my father were wicked, and I know that he is wrong. He said I was not to go and see the teacher, or to read her books. He told me I was not to come here and talk with you. He would keep me away from Donough if he could; but I know these things are right for me to do.”

“As I said before, you are merely following your own instincts, and claiming some external inspiration to justify yourself. Hundreds of frauds have done it before you. Your uncle was quite right. That epileptic might have injured you. Your mother and your father wronged you. Owen thinks I may seduce you, as your father did your mother. You and Donough——”

“You don't feel for me as Donough does.”

“You attract me. If I played with you as I would if I were a normal man like Donough, my feeling for you would get the better of me. Doesn't your inborn knowledge tell you that much?”

She lifted questioning eyes to him.

"I will do whatever you like, if you will let me stay with you."

Light flooded his face. He bent down and lifted her to her feet. Her head went back, and, holding her by the shoulders, he kissed her. She responded with a fervour that had in it passion, but nothing sensual. He held her away, looking at her strangely.

"You are my enemy," he said. "Yours is an attitude to life that I have been pledged from childhood to fight. Yet you are the one person in whose presence I feel at rest. Shall I give up my life and stay down here? You are so sure of yourself; perhaps you can tell me that."

"I only know things about myself."

"Would you stay here with me?"

She said mischievously, "You would get angry with me."

He kissed her again. "I don't think I shall get angry with you any more."

She looked at him, then twined her arms around his neck, and closed her eyes. Her lips came apart as he kissed them.

There was a scuffling sound outside, and a man's voice shouted a greeting. The door was flung open, and Seton Masterman burst into the room, wet and glowing.

"Hullo, David," he cried heartily. "I thought I should never make it. Phew, you've got a grand old fug in here." He stared at Sheila, then went on before they could reply. "I say, what's all the fuss at the farm? I can't get any sense out of them."

"It is Peadar," said Sheila. "He died last night out in the rain."

"Well!—I must say you take it pretty calmly." He turned to David, who was staring at him with dazed eyes.

"How did it happen? Incidentally, am I in time for lunch?"

Sheila and David exchanged a quick glance. Then she slipped out of the room, passing Seton without a word, and they heard her long skirts swish down the passage to the kitchen.

Seton closed the door, and flung off his coat.

"God," he said. "I'm glad to have got here."

## IX

DAVID SAT LOOKING at his friend as if the last time he had seen him had been years ago instead of weeks. It struck him that Seton had more to say and spoke faster than usual. He seemed afraid of silence. He enlarged on the difficulties of his journey, the swamped roads. He skidded away from subjects which might awaken feeling between them, and his omission of any reference to Sheila's presence, and in fancy dress, was obvious. David watched him from a detached corner of his mind, and for the first time failed to see the poise he had so much admired.

"To come back to the corpse," said Seton after a short pause. "Can't we do something about it? How long has he been dead?"

"Hard to say, because he's half drowned. I should put it at somewhere about four this morning."

"What was he doing out in the middle of the night?"

"God knows. He was old and getting very feeble. Besides——"

He was about to say that the old man had been queer of late, but stopped for fear of questions.

A spasm of impatience passed over Seton's face.

"I should have thought there was something we could do. The body must be seen to."

David raised an eyebrow. "These people have their own ways of doing things. They don't thank you to interfere. If we're good boys, we may get an invitation to the funeral."

"It's bad enough here today without corpses lying about. Thanks," as David handed him a glass. "I was about ready for that."

"I'll go into the kitchen and see what Sheila is doing for us. Make yourself comfortable if you can."

He found Sheila hot and unfriendly, but working with a concentration that amused him. He helped her silently, taking care not to get in her way, and soon he saw her lips lose their determined line and begin to curl upwards at the corners. Without a word spoken, there grew an atmosphere of conspiracy and understanding between them, and presently, as she stepped away from the fire, she looked at David, and they both laughed.

"He doesn't deserve it," said David. "You never take this trouble for me."

Sheila made a face. "He thinks of me only as a woman cooking a steak. If I cook it badly, I am worthless."

"You don't really know him, do you?"

"I don't want to know him."

Halfway through lunch, David said, "What do you think of my little maid?"

Seton hesitated, looking quickly at him, and down at his plate.

"I didn't really take her in. Isn't she the girl from the farm?"

David leaned back in his chair, looking at him in amusement.

"How incurious you are! If I were in your place, I should want to know all about the girl. How she came to look like that, and be dressed in clothes of a bygone time: whether she liked you, and whether you liked her."

"There are some questions better left unasked," Seton replied coldly.

"Tactful, aren't you? You give me credit for working quickly."

"In a place like this," began Seton, awkwardly, but David cut him short.

"No, this place has exactly the reverse effect. You don't concentrate on primitive urges: you have other things to do. Oh, keep cool; I'm not referring to myself, but to her. You should talk to her, you know. She would surprise you."

"I dare say," agreed Seton drily. "However, we can discuss her later. The rain seems to be stopping, and I want to get as much air as I can. I've been busy lately; I'm glad of a break."

He left the table and walked over to the window. "Fishing should be good after all this rain."

"Energetic, aren't you?"

"I've only got till tomorrow evening. You people with time to spare get lazy."

David felt suddenly that he would give anything to be rid of his visitor. What a bore he is, he thought, crashing in on us like an armoured tank. Then he remembered that he owed the visit to Seton's regard for him, and that, without Seton, he would never have known Kilree.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted. "So much goes on here that I forget to do anything."

"*What?*"

"Well, Peadar is dead, Elizabeth and old Kate have made up a lifelong feud, John has stolen Sheila's pictures and is having a blind on my whiskey, Owen and I are not on speaking terms because we had a hell of a row over the fishing. Before that, a cow died, and——"

Seton was staring at him. "You have become quite suburban," he said.

"I wouldn't call it that. Suburbia lacks the intensity of our atmosphere."

Seton's eyes narrowed.

"How are you feeling?"

"Never better," David replied, and was astonished to realise that it was true.

"And you find things to do?"

"Things to do? Why—take today, for instance. Early this morning the rain was torrential. I decided to spend the morning working at my book. Instead, Elizabeth arrives and hales me off to find a missing man. We find him dead in the rain, a second old woman comes, the two fight for him, then, when I intervene, they set their dogs on me." He put forward his bandaged hand. "I come back here to find Sheila a refugee from the farm, where her uncles are quarrelling." He saw a sceptical look on Seton's face, and smiled. "She was wet, and I was bitten, and we consoled each other with a fire and punch. Then you came bumping in. And suggested I was stagnating, and urged me to go out and do something!"

"Well, well. Wonders will never cease."

"What do you mean?"

"I never thought I should live to hear you talk like that. You, who shoved everything out of your way, who wouldn't step aside for anyone. Why, Alison told me . . ."

He stopped and flushed. David looked at him curiously.

"What on earth's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Since when does it embarrass you to talk about Alison? Yes, it's true, she complained that I wouldn't let people

monopolise my life (she didn't put it quite that way, I admit); and now I am letting people monopolise my life. Perhaps the difference lies in the people; unless I have changed."

"You have changed," said Seton slowly.

David looked at him as if he had not heard what he said. He had a feeling as of having been tipped to the extreme end of a see-saw by the sudden contact with Seton. Now, he was slowly regaining his balance. It's too late now, he thought. Ten years ago, perhaps; if Sheila had been the age she is now. That's nonsense. What's the good of thinking that way?

"I'm glad you have come," he said, with a sudden change of tone. "You've roused me out of a kind of mental coma into which I was sinking. Now—what shall we do first?"

They decided on a walk, for Seton said he needed exercise after his journey. The rain had almost stopped, and they were about to head inland, when an exclamation from David made his companion turn sharply.

Away to the left, across the surface of the water, lay a giant rainbow, so low that it was like the tinted breath of the sea. In quivering waves of colour, it swept to the foot of the far headland, visible through a shroud of mist. The bay was unearthly, and the headland, thus cut off from it, seemed the bastion of a ghostly world.

Both men stood silent. Presently, Seton coughed.

"New to me," he said. "Never seen one so low, or so spread out."

David said nothing. All comment on beauty is superfluous, he thought, as they plodded up the muddy track.

"Where are we going?"

"Shall we go inland, and work round by the deserted



village, and down to the river? We can come back then across the bridge."

They walked in a silence which irritated both, and which neither could break. Never had David felt so far separated from his companion. Usually there was their common world to discuss, and busily David turned up, inspected, and threw away subjects in which he knew Seton was interested. They were dead before they were mentioned. He heard what they would say about each, and it was futile.

"You said things have been stolen?" Seton said at last.

David told him the story as shortly as he could, and was rewarded by a stare of stupefaction.

"And you mean to say you have done nothing about it? Why, man, the paintings must be worth a fortune. The fellow should be jailed."

"My dear Seton! There are no police here, and the Seaport contingent would be very cross if we brought them down. Besides, we have no evidence. It would be much simpler to believe John's denial."

"Are you sure they have been stolen?"

"They have gone; and I don't know who else would take them."

"At least, you could confront the fellow."

"Confront him yourself, by all means, if you think it will do any good." He was silent, then went on, "You know, you are very like Alison."

Seton flushed. "What do you mean?"

"She was always trying to jog me into action. I admired her for it—till I began to see that it gratified her sense of power."

"Need we discuss Alison?" asked Seton, coldly.

"Certainly not, if you don't like it. But I'm sure that you and she discuss me in your spare moments."

Seton glanced at him, but his face was turned away. David went on:

"At least, you won't mind telling me how she is?"

"Very well, to the best of my belief."

"So she didn't know you were coming here?"

"No," replied Seton, after a moment's hesitation.

They had cut upwards from the track, and were walking on the slope of the foot-hill above Peadar's cottage. Suddenly, David caught his companion's arm and pointed. Below, trudging along Peadar's path, were two old women with black shawls over their heads.

"That must be the first time old Kate has set foot on that path," David exclaimed: and he told Seton the story of the long enmity between the two women, and their rivalry over Peadar. Seton listened indifferently at first, then, when the old man's name was mentioned, with more attention.

"Where have they put the body? We ought to keep an eye open, to see they don't do anything insanitary."

"He's probably in the cottage. I expect that's where they have just been. They will be back, though, and they won't want us hanging about."

"Nonsense. We'll go down and have a look."

He started down the slope, and David followed unwillingly. He felt a new, strange aversion from meddling in any way with the affairs of the people. Seton's insistence seemed to him an outrage, and he eyed the back of the well-cut, spotless tweed sports-coat, the pink neck and sandy head above it, with something like disgust.

The cottage had every appearance of being inhabited, with its half-open door and large iron kettle resting on the

ground outside. It was long and low, and from one end of the roof several slates were missing. The ground around it was fenced, badly, but with a clear message that within those boundaries Peadar was lord and master. To David, the fence took on a new significance. He felt a sudden breath of hostility, so strong that he looked round to see if anyone was watching.

Seton walked through to the cottage, looking about him with quick and expert eye.

"Do many of them live in ruins like this?" he asked.

He did not wait for a reply, but made for the door. David checked him.

"I shouldn't go in if I were you. These people take great offence if they think you are interfering. Besides," he hesitated, "I can't help feeling it's a bit too much to force oneself into the old fellow's house after he is dead. He hated me, you see. He would never allow me in, when he was alive."

Seton stared at him, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I say. Your nerves are in a fearful state. I'm not sure you hadn't better come back with me. I hoped, I own, that you would stay down all the summer: but—pull yourself together, David. I'm not going to hurt anyone."

He pushed the door wide open. Facing them, along the wall, was a pile of sheepskins, and on this couch lay Peadar, covered up to the neck with the fine fleeces, bleached snow-white.

The two went in and stared down at him. The old man's face had shed the weakness of age, and revealed in its immobility a dignified fineness of feature. At his sides burned two candles.

"My God!" Seton's voice rang out loud in the confined space. "They'll burn the place down."

"Possibly, if you leave the door wide open."

"Did you ever see anything so stupid, to leave candles burning beside all that wool?"

"Wool doesn't burn easily."

Seton started to examine the place, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

"No one would believe this. Why—Good God—the floor is plain mud. Had he no proper furniture?"

"I can't tell you. As I said, this is the first time I've been here."

"A grandfather clock and one chair. Good God."

The clock had stopped. He shook it, eliciting a faint protesting jangle from the bell.

"No sanitation, no drainage, and not even a proper chimney. I had no idea. It's positively shocking."

"Did you never come in when you were here before?"

"No. Why should I?"

"You seem to know the people even less than I do."

"I had friends here with me. I was fishing. I knew the people at the farm, of course." He looked about him again. "My God. To think a human being could exist in such a hovel."

"It's as well," said David evenly, "that he's not alive to hear you."

They stepped outside, David pulling the door to after him.

"You know, Seton," he said, "you are too glib."

"What on earth do you mean?"

David hesitated: then the words rushed out with a passion that surprised him.

"You've got to mind your step when you are trying to improve people. You can't just pluck a man out of his

small, dirty house, and plant him immediately in a bigger and cleaner one. You have to gather up all the little bits and pieces of his pride and his effort, the box outside his kitchen window where he has tried time and time again to grow geraniums, the shelf he nailed up in the kitchen for his wife to keep her knitting, so that she could pick it up if ever she had a moment to spare, the improvement in the kitchen floor which he made with strips of linoleum off the refuse dump, and so on and so forth. Rubbish to you, but precious to him. He gets attached to it all, and you must move him tenderly, or something will be broken and he will hate you, even though you have improved his conditions. You can't be too careful in helping people. You can't do anything at all for them until the thing they ask for coincides exactly with what you are prepared to give them; which is hardly ever."

Seton's eyes had contracted to pinpoints of astonishment. When David stopped, he emitted a long whistle.

"And since when, may I ask, have you taken to the study of welfare work?"

"Sorry if I surprise you. You said you hoped I would develop in some direction through coming here."

They began to walk down the slope.

"What you have just said is typical in one way," Seton said at last. "It's completely impractical. At that rate, one would never do anything at all."

David threw out his arms. "What do you mean by 'practical'? Something you can do easily, with no mental effort. The nearest thing at hand. A cowardly excuse for not thinking, for not exerting yourself. Instead of letting people find the job they are really fitted to do, so that they can do it with conviction and real effect, you hurl yourselves into any outlet that comes along, war work, peace

work, slumming, propaganda, anything to save the trouble of thinking the problem out. See-saw, see-saw! 'Here, let me get on quickly. Is there room for me?'"

He stopped, shaking.

"Aren't you on the see-saw yourself? Getting worked up about these things, after ignoring them all your life?"

"One has got to make a start some time. I was with Alison once in a restaurant. A waitress came to serve us. She was white and tired looking, and Alison exclaimed to me what a shame it was that these people had to work such frightfully long hours, and no proper care was taken of them. She began to question the waitress, who answered her quite courteously, but very shortly. I was terribly ashamed."

"Why on earth?"

"Because, you see, the girl didn't want to be questioned. She was tired, she was overworked, I dare say, but she had an inner dignity. She was independent, she managed her own life. She didn't want interference."

"But——"

"That's your mistake, and Alison's too. You think in terms of economics. You barge in, and neglect the human element altogether."

"But, good God, David! This from *you*! *You* to talk of the human element! You, who trampled on people's feelings, and snapped at them like a mad dog."

David had gone white.

"You're right. It's only down here that I can speak straight. I know I'm a kind of destroyer, that I injure everyone with whom I come in contact. That's why I mustn't go back amongst people whom I hate, whom I——"

He bit his lip, and Seton, ignoring one thing, pounced on the other.

"You'll stay on here, then?"

"I don't know. I can't make up my mind about anything."

They walked on, and began to talk of indifferent matters. Seton told David of hospital affairs, and the confusion that had come about through having to close two wards for rebuilding. He talked well, and David, not listening at first, was drawn away from his agitation.

At tea time, Sheila looked out of the window and saw them talking amicably together as they approached the cottage.

After tea, Seton pressed Sheila with questions as to Peadar's funeral. David could see that she answered unwillingly. She said that they would bury the old man close to the byre beside his cow, but did not appear to know when.

"Is Father Morrissey coming?" David asked.

"No. He's away up in the country. He won't be back at the presbytery till Tuesday."

"He has a very big, scattered parish," David explained. He turned again to Sheila.

"If it's while Dr. Masterman is here, may we watch the funeral?"

She looked at him apologetically. "They might not like it," she said. "You could watch from a distance."

"It isn't that one wants to interfere," Seton was careful to explain, and David felt the corner of his mouth twitch sardonically. "It's only that, in the interests of everyone's health, one wants to be sure that everything is properly done."

Sheila glanced at him under her eyelashes, and withdrew without saying anything.

The two men smoked a pipe, then got out their rods and spent the rest of the afternoon fishing in the river. David was glad, for it kept them apart. He was already counting the hours till his guest should go.



X

SHEILA WENT OUT by the back-door, and ran along the track towards Peadar's cottage. Looking back at the light of the room where the two men were spending the evening, she was glad to be leaving them behind. She would go back, of course, she would have to go back: but the next day Dr. Masterman would be gone.

A cool breath, smelling of dusk, was rising from the ground. Slugs were abroad. She noticed everything as she hurried along, but her mind made no comment.

The mourners were there, outside the little cottage, Donough among them, his huge form towering above the others. She went to them thankfully, her people to whom she belonged. She saw a wish in her mind that David Heron had never come to Kilree. The wish passed like a gull darting by the hollow in the cliff. No one spoke, as she came up, and Owen would not see her, but Donough stepped forward and shook her hand. Behind him stood his helper, Jamie, a tall silent young man, with black hair and moustache, wearing a jersey.

On the ground lay a long white bundle. With sudden realisation, Sheila dropped on her knees beside the sheep-skin wrappings. Within them lay Peadar, whom she had known her whole life long, who had held her hand when, as a tiny child, she had stumbled over the rough ground that led to his byre: Peadar, who had taught her how to milk the cow, to make pig mash, and chicken food. She had always preferred to learn from him rather than from

Owen or John. She would not see his face again, nor hear his voice. She caught hold of the wrappings and tried to tear them apart. At once she felt Donough's huge hands under her arm-pits, and was lifted to her feet.

"No, Sheila, we are going to put him in the ground."

"I want to see his face."

"You have seen it many a day. You know it as well as you know your own."

It was true. She knew it by heart, from the time when, as a baby, she had traced the lines on it with tiny fingers. She could bring Peadar's face to her whenever she chose to think of him. She could hear his voice.

They were looking at her pityingly. Her mind was cloudy. She thought, If only I could fasten myself down; but she was suspended, floating helplessly as if in the air, unable to come down. "Peadar," she cried, but no sound passed her lips: and she knew that he would always be with her, as far as he had come, for his past was all twined up with hers, and hers was always with her.

There was a movement at her feet. Owen and Donough had stooped, and were shouldering the old man's wasted body. The two old women lit their torches, for the evening was overcast, and the way treacherous. They stood, one on either side of the burden, from time to time putting up a shrivelled hand and gently touching the wrappings. Sheila walked after them, a little to one side: Jamie, awkward, slouched along, his cap in his hands.

So Peadar was borne upon the path on which he had so long laboured. It was an odd procession, and one half of Sheila's mind recognised the oddity, surprising the rest of her, to whom it was a matter of course. Several times lately she had caught herself seeing the life of her own folk with different eyes, with the eyes of the stranger,

David Heron. It was as if a part of her had always been outside her life here, and he had taught that part to see. He had found speech for it too. It seemed that, in his presence, she remembered a language, buried and disused. He had wanted to see Peadar buried, he and his friend—but they shall not, she told herself fiercely, and pressed forward and touched Donough's coat-sleeve, conscious again of being with her own people.

She looked around, and saw the huge towering gloom of the mountain, and the great wash of dark water that stretched from its shoulder along the bay behind them. Then they were at the ruined cottage, dark and empty, where Peadar had sat to watch his cow placidly munching, day after day. Near by, a deep hole fell into the ground, with a heap of rich, dark earth turned up beside it.

After they had lowered the body into the hole, and were covering him, Kate set up a shrill wailing that was like the wind rising up the scale and blowing away. Before they could stop her, she had flung herself into the grave, and was scratching in the loose earth with her hands. Owen uttered an exclamation, and Donough, stooping, caught her clothes at the small of the back with one hand, and lifted her out. Almost before he had set her on the ground, she had seized up her crutch, and was away with her mad scampering gait, hopping and hobbling, disappearing speedily in the dusk. Her wailing floated back to them like a disembodied voice.

As the last of the earth was shovelled in, Sheila drew close to Donough. Once again the knowledge swept upon her that she stood by a chasm greater than Peadar's grave.

Owen stood leaning on his spade. The whole time, he had given no sign of seeing that Sheila was there. Elizabeth crouched by the grave, hugging a book to her breast, but she did not attempt to open it.

With a whisper to Sheila, Donough walked over to Elizabeth, and held out his hand for the book. She glared, but let him take it. Opening it, his great thumbs fumbled at the pages, but found the place, and in deep accents he read the prayer which the priest had told them they must use when he could not be by.

Then he went over and said something in an undertone to Owen: and suddenly Sheila knew that this night she could not bear to be even with him, and turned and hurried along the causeway to return to her work in the kitchen, where she would have light and be by herself, and have things to do that would keep thought away.

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## XI

SETON WOKE EARLY, had his bath, shaved, and dressed. Listening outside David's room, he heard no sound. He went downstairs, and looked into the kitchen, expecting to see it empty. Instead, he found the fire blazing, the kettle with its lid dancing up and down, and Sheila cutting the rinds from a pile of rashers.

"Good morning," he said coldly. He had intended to make the breakfast himself, and have everything ready, as the fruit of his own labours, when David came downstairs: and was annoyed that his purpose had been frustrated.

"Mr. Heron seems to be still asleep. What time does he have breakfast?"

She looked at him as if she did not understand, and he felt his vexation increase.

"If you have other things to do, you can leave this to me. I am accustomed to getting my own breakfast."

"I have nothing else to do: but I will go if you want me to."

"No, no."

What oafs these peasants were, he thought. Suddenly he remembered something, and looked at her with curiosity. Seager's daughter? She might be, or she might not. Her looks told nothing, except that her build was more fragile than that of the average country girl of these parts. She was a slattern, that was evident. Her dress was crumpled and had patches of mud on it, her hair was unbrushed and

tangled, her eyes had stains under them as if she had not slept. Fine eyes, though. Then he remembered her as he had seen her the night before, clean and almost well-groomed. The little slut, he thought: she dresses up for him, I'll be bound.

Her continued silence baffled and irritated him.

"I asked you what time breakfast was, because there are no signs of Mr. Heron stirring. If he gets up late as a rule, I would like to have mine and go out for an hour or two. I have so short a time here."

"David is usually up very early." (David? he thought angrily: the little baggage!) "I do not know why he is asleep now. Perhaps he had a headache and could not sleep in the night."

He noticed that her voice was soft, with hardly a trace of accent, though the tone had a singsong cadence which belonged to the Island. He was vexed at the uncertainty he felt as to how to treat her. It was she who ought to be ill at ease, not he.

"In that case, I'll have some tea and be off. I dare say I'll be back by the time he is down."

He watched her reach for a tea-pot and spoon the leaves into it.

"Does he often have headaches?"

Sheila struggled with a reluctance to talk to this man, whose easy, indifferent manner aroused hostility in her, and a desire to hear anything he might have to say about David.

"Yes, he has headaches, but not so many as he had when he came first."

"You think the place is good for him?"

She recoiled from everything the tone implied, though outwardly it was friendly.

"He likes to be alone, and there is nothing here to bring trouble to him," she said pointedly.

Seton laughed.

"You want to guard him from the world, eh? Tell me, how does he strike you? Do you find him strange, or quite ordinary? Working for him here, you must be in a good position to judge. I have special reasons for asking."

"You are his friend. You know him well."

"He has caused all of us, his friends, a great deal of anxiety lately. I hoped that the rest down here would help him."

She set down the teapot on the table and went over to attend to the bacon.

"Will you have your breakfast in the other room?"

"No," said Seton heartily. "I'll have it here, and you shall tell me how my friend is getting on. I'm his doctor, you know."

She got the meal ready with a concentration which made talking difficult. Seton questioned her, and she gave a curt account of the events since David's coming.

He tried to get her to talk about herself, asking her about her life and activities, but here he had even less success.

"You know," he said, "there are several people vitally interested in David's well-being. I, for one. Then there's his wife."

He watched her carefully as he mentioned Alison, of whose existence he suspected she had never heard.

For a moment she appeared completely indifferent. Then her control broke.

"If she is interested, why does she not come here? Why does she leave him alone?"

He spoke slowly, choosing his words with great care.

"I don't know how much you know of David's affairs; though I gather he has made a friend of you. He and his wife have decided to live apart, for a time at any rate: but that doesn't mean that they have lost interest in each other."

"David talks very little about his wife."

"The subject is painful to him, so I don't suppose he would." Sizing her up, he decided to change his tactics. "Tell me—has he ever said anything to you about remaining here?"

She looked at him, her face clouded with suspicion.

"Why are you asking me that?"

"I'll be quite frank with you. David has, lately, been a great puzzle to his friends. It was clear that he was physically as well as mentally ill, and I, as his doctor, suggested a long and solitary rest, in which he would have a chance to get clear of the confusion into which he had fallen. I came down hoping to find him changed. I *do* find him changed, but in a wholly unexpected way. I thought that you, who have been his constant companion here"—he glanced at her, but she made no sign—"might be able to explain this to me."

"And what would you do then?"

"I would take action. David seems to have no sense of responsibility. There's his wife, in suspense: his affairs, all in a mess——"

"Has his wife no money?" Sheila interrupted.

"Oh, money isn't the difficulty. She has plenty, thank God, and she is the most generous creature alive when it comes to helping others. If it comes to that," he watched her narrowly again, "David has money too. That's been his curse."

"Why his curse?"

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"He has never really needed to do anything. He has always been able to wait and choose."

"I don't see anything wrong with that."

"Nothing wrong for you perhaps, or for me: but some natures need a strong incentive. If David had *had* to work—well, things might have been very different."

Sheila's face was immovable.

"There's nothing I can tell you," she said. "He is kind to me, and I like him. At first he used to get angry very often, but now it is only very seldom." She tilted her chin at him. "If you have known him such a long time, what is there I can tell you?"

"You are telling me precisely what I want to know." He smiled, but she did not respond. "These sudden bursts of anger," he continued, "were what made life with him impossible. You'll hardly believe me, I expect, when I tell you what a charming and delightful person he used to be."

Sheila eyed him with growing dislike.

"Perhaps you would understand better," he went on, "and be more willing to help me, if I told you something about his life before he came here."

With all her power she tried to tell him that she wanted to hear nothing of David from David's enemy, but her curiosity and her need for understanding were too strong. She listened sullenly.

"David's first trouble was his mother. She was a head-strong woman with a violent temper. She was, I believe, of Highland descent. She was wild, careless, and dreamy. She loved her husband passionately, and at first tried to model herself on him. She succeeded up to a point, but the strain was too much, and at times she would burst out like a madwoman.

"David was pulled both ways. There's a lot of his mother in him, but he adored his father, and decided that he must be like him. He was a brilliant boy, full of possibilities, but he didn't do as well at school as he should have, and his university career was something of a fiasco. He dabbled about for a time doing nothing, and then, at twenty-five or thereabouts, he decided to take up medicine."

Sheila's interest was too much for her.

"Why did he do that? He did not like it. He told me he hated to see anyone in pain, and that it often made him sick himself to have to attend to any sick person."

Seton's brows rose in surprise.

"He never told me that. I didn't know he had that against it—though I often wondered why he took it up. I dare say it was for that very reason! He had a great belief in forcing himself by sheer will-power. No, I thought his trouble about medicine was that he couldn't stomach any of the necessary humbug. That's a favourite theme of his, as I dare say you have found. He would not make the necessary little concessions and compromises. He said they were lies——"

He broke off, for Sheila was staring at the door.

Seton turned and saw David standing there, his face unshaven and haggard in the morning light.

"And I say so still," he said. "I don't know what your game is, Seton, but you seem to be discussing me very freely. For my good, of course!"

Seton faced him. "I feel quite free to do so, considering our relationship."

"Only trying to be helpful, eh?" David gave an ugly smile. "Let me tell you this, Dr. Seton bloody Masterman. People who are always keen to help others have nine

times out of ten been defeated themselves. It's time you knew that. You can't help others as an escape from yourself."

"I don't quite follow," Seton said with dignity.

"You wouldn't."

"Rather enigmatic, aren't you?"

David came into the room and stood in front of the fire, stretching his hands backwards to the blaze. He eyed Seton with derision.

"You're all defeated, the whole pack of you. You're lifeless. You couldn't help a white mouse."

Seton tried to laugh it off. "Oh, I don't know." He glanced at Sheila. "We have our uses."

"You are defeated, I tell you." David's voice rose. "Corpses can't help. They can only share out their own defeat."

"You are generalising rather violently. Would you, for instance, call Alison a corpse?"

"God, no. She's a blood-sucker. She feeds on power. When she comes back from one of her committee meetings, oozing self-satisfaction——"

"Look here, Heron." Seton had sprung to his feet, and his voice shook with the effort at control. "You can say what you like about me, but I'm not going to allow you to insult Alison."

"Owning *her* now, are you?"

"I'm not going to stand——"

"Director-general of the universe. I know. Anyway, you mentioned her first."

"Never mind who mentioned her first: but when I hear you, *you* of all people, running Alison down, then I think it's time you heard the truth."

David turned to Sheila.

"When people are going to be offensive, they always call it the truth."

"It is the truth. Alison is a hundred times too good for you. With a wife like her, any man with a spark of decency in him could get anywhere. But you, her husband, have chosen to turn and twist every action and feeling of hers, till she's bewildered to the point of a breakdown. Oh, you needn't shake your head! it's true. She's told me so herself—now that things have come to this point. For years she tried her hardest with you, waiting patiently, doing all she could to help you out of yourself. She has everything you could want in a woman; beauty, intelligence, goodness, and a very unusual conception of her duty, not only towards her immediate circle, but towards society as a whole. And *you* choose to criticise her—you who do nothing, absolutely nothing, to help another living soul! You who do your very best to hurt and antagonise every man and woman with whom you come in contact. My God! I've wanted to say this to you for a long time. I've implored Alison to let me, but she begged me to keep it in. She shielded you even then, saying that you were ill and that it would all pass. Do you realise that you have ruined her life? Couldn't you have made an effort on her behalf, if not on your own?"

"Bravo!" David clapped his hands. "Very pretty, only you have left out—— You smug fool!" he exploded suddenly. "What pleasure do you think it gives me to be at odds with Alison?"

"I can't imagine. Your whole notion of pleasure is diseased."

"And why? Whose fault is that? Come on, let's have your diagnosis."

Seton's control snapped, and he delivered the thrust he had been trying to withhold.

"I am not an alienist," he said.

There was a dead silence. David stood completely still. Sheila cried out at the expression on his face, then clapped her hand to her mouth and watched fearfully.

"Thank you. I said you were a useless pack of swine. True to the noblest tradition of your calling, you shuffle off the responsibility, and hand me on to another, as soon as the case requires a little thinking."

Both of them had time to notice with surprise how he avoided the major implication.

"So you tried your rest and your fresh air, did you, and your moral advice?" David went on. "So did Alison. 'Oh, he's overworked,' she would say to her friends. 'Poor dear, he works so hard: he doesn't get enough fresh air.' Fresh air! Go and get some yourself."

"Look here——"

"Get to hell out of this!" David shouted, saliva at the corners of his mouth. "If you show your face around this door again, I'll smash it for you."

Seton stood, stiff and outraged. Then he pushed his chair noisily in to the table, and left the room. There was a silence. Sheila said quietly:

"I will make you some breakfast."

He shook his head. "I'll get myself a drink."

He went out of the room and returned almost at once, with a glass half full of neat whiskey.

"Well, Sheila. What about it? You've heard what my best friend thinks of me."

"I don't like him," she said vehemently.

He smiled and drank.

"That's what Alison would call loyalty. I haven't much

use for loyalty. What's the good of pretending? A lot of what I said about Seton is only half true. So far as he can see himself and understand himself, he's perfectly sincere. He's a success, and I'm a failure. He can find a comfortable place in a world that has no use for me."

Sheila wrinkled her brow. She was trying to keep fast to what made sense in all this storm of accusation.

"He was speaking to me about your mother," she said.

"My mother? Like his impudence! What does he know about her? Only what Alison told him. And Alison loathed the sight of her." He paused and emptied his glass. "My mother was a very strange woman, violent and unreasonable, and at odds with everyone. I don't know why she married my father. She may have loved him, I dare say she did, for she had a passionate nature. Or she may have been bullied into doing so by her parents, who found her difficult, and wanted to get her out of the way. I know my father did his best to change her."

"Perhaps that was the trouble. I would hate anyone to try to change me."

"She didn't hate him. She admired him. He told me that when she was young, she used to beg him to make her civilised. He said . . . "

He broke off, staring in front of him.

"My God," he said slowly. "I'm blind. It's almost too exact a parallel. My father and my mother, Alison and myself. I married Alison because I admired her so much that I wanted to be just like her. I tried hard enough."

His voice died away, and he stared at the window. It was some seconds before Sheila ventured to speak.

"I think it would be terrible to be made like someone else," she said.

He did not heed her. His hands were clasping and unclasping behind his back, as if he were in physical pain.

"When I am by myself, I want to be with Alison and Seton, to live the life they live, to be liked by the people who like them. When I am with them, I feel I have nothing to do with them and their way of life, and I hate them. Because I have tried to make myself like them, I don't belong to either world: theirs or this. That must be why I hate them. Oh, well, what does it matter? Nobody cares. Very soon I shan't care myself."

He looked at her, expecting her to protest, but she merely smiled and shook her head. He saw then that her face was grey and drawn, that her eyes were abnormally large and circled with black. Her face, always small, was pinched and forlorn, almost monkeyish.

He went over to her, took her hands, and pulled her to the one chair by the fire.

"You must be sick and tired of me and all to do with me. Poor little Sheila. But you're not little at all. You are the one exception, the one person who really does help me. You make me look at things till I feel I am getting nearer to understanding them. Seton—it's nonsense—this is only an interruption. I shall get back when he goes. Go on helping me, Sheila." He wrung her hands up and down. "You will, won't you? You will stay with me till I get there?"

A spasm of weariness swept over her, so strong she thought she would faint. Summoning all her strength, she pressed his hands.

"I will stay," she promised; and he bent down and kissed her.

Footsteps sounded outside. David looked at her incredulously, as the door swung open and Seton stood on the

threshold. His glance took them in, yet without heeding. He cleared his throat hoarsely, and said to David. "There's something very wrong at the farm. You had better come."

Sheila sprang up.

"What is it?" she asked.

David stood quite still. The colour drained from his face. More harm, more harm. What was the blow now?

Seton's mouth curled. "I don't want to meddle with what is not my business. But this is a case in which even you, I think, will agree that something must be done."

"What's wrong?"

"Attempted murder."

Sheila cried out, and would have rushed past Seton, but he gripped her. His eyes never left David's face, which was slowly sickening with horror.

"You had better let me see to it," Seton said contemptuously. "I forgot you didn't like the sight of blood."

David snarled, and sprang forward. A swinging blow on the mouth crushed Seton's upper lip against his teeth, and sent him staggering back. More shocked than hurt, he put his hand to his mouth and drew it away, covered with blood. At the same instant, Sheila pushed past him, dragging David by the hand.

Recovering himself, Seton pulled out his handkerchief, soaked it under the tap, and, holding it to his mouth, followed them up the lane.

They were half-way to the farmhouse, David ahead. At the door of the farm, he turned and spoke to Sheila. She tried to struggle past him, but he was holding her fast and remonstrating, as Seton caught them up.

David looked at him, icy bitterness in his eyes.

"Here," he said curtly. "Keep her out of this. Why did you break it to her as you did?"



"I must go in," said Sheila wildly. "Let me go! I am not afraid, whatever it is."

Seton took hold of her, and David went into the kitchen. In the doorway, he started back, for Elizabeth, crouching, her eyes on fire, tried to bar the way.

"Let me go!" he heard Sheila cry behind him. Seton gave a surprised grunt, and in an instant Sheila had wormed her way past David. She ran to Elizabeth, and caught her in her arms, forcing her aside.

David went past them. Owen was lolling in an armchair, his head back, his arms dangling. An ugly wound ran down the left side of his head. His white hair was matted with blood.

"He was on the floor," Seton said at David's elbow, and pointed to a small pool of blood. "I picked him up; otherwise I have left things just as they were."

David was bending over the old man, examining the wound.

At his touch, Owen stirred and murmured. His eyes half opened: he saw David and tried to draw away. The effort obviously hurt him, for he shut his eyes again.

In the shock of finding him, David forgot what had just been happening. He turned to Seton, his eyebrows raised in enquiry.

"No fracture," Seton said. "At least, I think not."

Swiftly David turned to Sheila.

"Run back to the house, will you, and get my things. You know; what we used the other day."

"Good," Seton said. "I have nothing here."

He drew a glass of water from the tap, went over to the old man, and held it to his lips. Owen put up his hand, and Seton held it round the glass, guiding him as he drank.

"Thank you," Owen muttered. "Thank you. I am all right now."

He blinked painfully.

"How did it happen?" Seton asked.

Owen pretended not to hear. Seton asked him again in a louder tone.

The old man's face stiffened. He's going to tell us a lie, David thought.

"I don't know," Owen said weakly, at last. "I was sitting here in my chair, and sleep overcame me. I must have fallen."

"Rot!" said Seton loudly. "You've had a crack over the head with a bottle, by the look of you."

The old man scowled, and drew himself away, muttering offensively.

"Come on," Seton said. "You'll have to tell the police presently, so you may as well tell us."

David plucked at his arm.

"Let him alone," he said. "Haven't you the decency to accept his story?"

Seaton stared at him, then made a helpless gesture in the air.

"I give it up," he said. "You're all mad in this place."

He walked off to the sink, leaving David standing, filled with amazement at himself. What upheaval had there been in his nature, that he, who had refused one lie from Owen, should now champion him in a lie even more absurd?

A patter of steps and quick breathing announced Sheila's return. Relieved at having something to do, the two men set to work.

Owen recoiled as they approached him, and tried to ward them off.

"No. No," he said, "I do not wish you to touch me. Let me alone."

Sheila made a move to intercede, but he turned on her fiercely, and she fell back.

"You had better let us do it," said David. "Let me then, if you won't let him. Be generous. It's the only amends I can make."

Owen was looking at him queerly.

"Come on, man," David urged him. "You don't want to risk being ill. It's not bad. We can fix you up in a few minutes. You can trust us."

Without waiting for an answer, he began: and Owen, sitting limp in his chair, suffered himself to be attended to by the two aliens, and the girl of whom all her life he had been so bitterly ashamed.

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## XII

THE YOUNG REPORTER stared fixedly in David's face.

"Look at here," he said. "There must be a bloody fine story at the back o' this."

David eyed him with distaste. He was thickset and fat, and though he was quite young, twenty-six or thereabouts, his skin was already coarsened with drink, and there were bags under his prominent blue eyes. He had a fair moustache, and would soon be bald. His spatulate fingers were yellow with nicotine, his nails bitten to the quick.

He was the second visitor whom John's flitting had brought to Kilree. The first was a sergeant of police, stolid and red-faced, and reproachful of manner. David had been at pains to keep him off what had happened at the farm, only to find that he had heard nothing about it. Angling as carefully as he could, David elicited from him that the charge against John seemed to be some kind of attempted fraud, but could get no farther. The sergeant sat for a while, shaking his head, and conveying to David that he held him responsible, as an educated man in a community that knew no better, for any improprieties that might have occurred.

The reporter leaned forward and leered. He had the false good-humour of a certain type of commercial traveller, and used very much the same methods of approach.

"Tell a poor divil," he pleaded. "Ah, come on."

"What exactly do you want to know?"

"What do I want to know? I want to know what's at the back of all this business. Whose pictures were they? Did the chap steal them?"

"You must remember," David told him, "that I don't know in the least what has happened. Which pictures? What chap?"

The leer broadened.

"Ah, go on! Who do ye think ye're coddling?"

David looked at him. "I may possibly be able to tell you something of this end of the story," he said, "but, quite honestly, we none of us here know what happened at yours."

"Did the polis not tell ye?"

"Nothing at all. So far as I can make out, they had John Brosnan, and didn't know what to charge him with."

"They knew what to charge him with all right." His eyelids snapped. "Do ye mean to tell me ye don't know about it?"

"I give you my word of honour. I'd very much like to know."

"Well," said the reporter, "it's the damndest, queerest set out I heard this many a day. A day or so back this chap—what do ye say his name is? Brosnan?—This chap walked into Seaport, and asked for a drink in the first pub on the quay. He had a bundle with him, which he hugged to himself as if it were something very precious. He had several drinks, and when people asked him what was in the bundle, he just looked foxy, and dropped hints.

"They gave up interest in the matter soon, thinking he had too much taken. Then, all of a sudden, he began to make enquiries for an art dealer, or a man who knew about pictures.

"They asked him what the hell he wanted with such a man, and he grew very sulky. But, after a lot of questioning, he admitted he had something to sell.

"There's no picture merchant in Seaport," the reporter went on, "but it so happens that there's one man who knows about pictures, a retired portrait painter of the name of Phillipps. He used to be a professional, and made a name for himself in Dublin years back. Now he's a sort of local celebrity—ye'll often see his photo on the pianna in hotel drawing-rooms, and a very popular old boy he is. A great fisherman, thinks there's no place in the world like Seaport.

"Well, the publican, out for a bit of gas, thought he'd send the tramp to Phillipps. He knew the old boy was as fond of a joke as he was himself. They put some more drink into the chap, just to improve matters, and then quite a procession of them escorted him and his bundle to Phillipps' house. He didn't like the escort. They thought he was going to bite them, finally, he got so angry: but, bedad, they brought him to the door and pushed him in."

The reporter stopped and chuckled.

"When he got inside, the chap, who was incoherent now from liquor, told some sort of a rambling yarn about some paintings which he said were the work of Joseph Seager. Ye know; the landscape painter.

"As a matter of fact, the thing wasn't as incredible as it sounds, because Seager did live down here one time, about twenty years ago: and there was a rumour that there was some work of his about the place still, only no one could lay hands on it.

"Phillipps had known Seager, and had a great regard for him. He suspected some sort of a hoax, but all the same he listened.

"Finally, this Brosnan chap actually offered to produce the paintings if Phillipps would sign an agreement with him first. Oh, he was a cunning boyo, but not quite up to this sort of a job. I gather he had no idea what Seager's work would really be worth, but he knew it would fetch money.

"Phillipps actually had to draw up some sort of a bill of sale before the visitor would open his parcel, and then——", the man leaned back in his chair and slapped his knee—"oh, it's a grand yarn. If it was in a book, ye'd never believe it. On the top of the bundle was a little landscape, a small, square picture. Phillipps recognised it at once as a genuine Seager. The signature was right, and he would know the brushwork anywhere. While he stared at this, Brosnan began to unroll the others, and as he slowly showed the next one—he unrolled it bottom first—Phillipps saw it was a portrait with Seager's signature.

"The old boy nearly jumped out of his chair, for Seager was hardly known to touch portraits, and here by the look of it was a bundle of them. And then—what do ye think?"

"I have no idea." David's heart was beating fast.

"When he unrolled the portrait, there was a big, round hole in the middle of the canvas. The head had been cut out, clean as a whistle. It was the same with every bloody one of them. They were all portraits of women, and the head had been cut out of each one. Did ye ever hear a thing the like of that? Paintings that would have been worth thousands, and someone had cut them up. Deliberate vandalism."

David sat half stunned. Then he remembered.

"Was there a nude among them?" he asked.

"There was not. Why?"

The man was sitting up, his eyes hard and alert.

"I only wondered," David said, thinking to himself, They must have burnt it.

He pulled himself together and faced the reporter.

"I don't see what you are complaining about," he said. "It wouldn't have been half such a good story if the heads had been left in."

The reporter shook his head.

"That's a narra view," he said. "I'm surprised at your taking that view of it. If I looked at it that way, now, there might be an excuse: but I'm thinking of the loss to the world of art."

"You are, are you?"

"I am." The reporter looked at him belligerently.

"What have they done to John Brosnan?"

"Oh yes. I hadn't done telling ye. He went off the deep end when he realised that the pictures were worthless. Shouted and cried and made a fearful scene. Ran out of the house with old Phillipps after him, bawling bloody murder."

"What's his actual offence, though? Stealing the pictures?"

The projecting eyes glinted sharply again. "Did he steal the pictures?"

David made haste to cover up.

"I asked you what they charged him with. They must have said something."

"They held him for attempted fraud." He was looking suspiciously at David. "Look at here: if ye don't mind my saying so, ye know a great deal more about this than ye make out."

"You flatter me."

"Ah, come on. Be a sport."

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"My dear man, as you see, I don't know nearly as much as you do."

"Well." He leaned forward and prodded David in the ribs. "Do this for a chap, anyway. Let me have a squint at the girl. Come on; where have ye hidden her?"

"Why, isn't she at the farm?"

"Ye know bloody well she isn't at the farm."

"In that case, she's probably down by the shore, or up in the bogs gathering turf. Or perhaps she's gone into the village on the van, or gone out fishing with her young man."

"Or gone to Dublin to have tea with Dev," said the young man sourly. "Well, if ye won't, ye won't. But I must say, I think it's damned unsporting of ye."

"I'm sorry." David held himself in: he knew it was the quickest way to get rid of the fellow. "Have another drink."

"Thanks. Never refuse a good offer." He held up the glass. "Chin chin."

He drank it noisily, and looked around the room. Once again, David was thankful he had hidden the portrait.

"Well—if ye're sure ye can tell me no more?"

"I can't. And I don't know where the girl is, I give you my word."

"Well, so long." He turned in the doorway. "Is she going to get married?"

"She may be."

"What's the chap's name?"

"Does it matter?"

"It's not yourself, by any chance?"

"Not that I know of."

"Gossipy lot hereabouts, aren't ye?" said the young man bitterly. "Well, stink oh." And he went.

David stood for a minute. It would have done no good to tell the man what he thought of him, and pitch him out on his face. Besides, he was heavy and strong. The programme might not have gone according to plan.

There was a sound in the passage, and Sheila put her head in.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"Newspaper man. He told me about John."

"Did he bring the pictures back?"

"No. They were ruined. The heads had been cut out of them."

She nodded two or three times.

"That was Owen. It was he took them, not John."

"I suppose he caught John making off with them, and tried to stop him, and John fetched him that crack over the head."

"Owen never told you that?"

"It's obvious."

Sheila sighed.

"Well," David went on. "What's going to happen now?"

"How do you mean, what's going to happen?"

"There's a rumour about," he said, watching her, "that you are going to get married. The newspaper man had heard it."

She stared at him, motionless. Then the colour came up into her face.

"Why," she said in a low tone. "Do you want me to go away?"

"You funny little image. I wasn't thinking of that at all."

"But do you?"

"I can't say I do. I have got used to having you about the place."

His smile took away the casualness of the words. He went over to the fire, and she came and stood beside him.

"What would you do if I went, David?"

He did not answer. He was looking down at her upturned face, her cheeks with the tinge of gold, and the deep eyes so oddly shot with light. Why, he said to himself, they are mole colour. His heart quickened. She's really lovely, he thought, though it takes time to see it. I might have loved her, but, thank God, I can't think of her as a woman. Not many men would dare to love her; but anyone who did would be faithful to her.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked.

"I'm thinking what a glorious person you would be to live with. You would live entirely inside yourself, but you would always be there, and vividly there. You would never try to grasp, you would just stretch out finger-tips, touch, and go on alone. Two people living together, each of them moving on and growing: exchanging their experiences, sharing them sometimes, but always moving, no matter how their paths diverged: that's how you and your lover would live. I can't imagine you ever trying to possess a man: or to change him."

She smiled, and wrinkled her nose at him. "I don't know what you are talking about."

He pulled her close and kissed her cheek.

"I'm just saying that you are a companionable little object, and would be easy to live with. You're amusing, and you mind your own business."

She rubbed her head against his shoulder.

"Will Dr. Masterman come down here again?"

His face darkened. "I don't suppose he will ever come back. Why should he?"

She was glad.

"He won't come back," David said, "because I said something he considered unforgivable. I told him why he liked me. I let him do what he wanted with my life, because I took him for my model: and that gave him power over me. The same with Alison."

While he spoke, his face had become almost wizened. She stared up at him wonderingly.

"You admire her and Dr. Masterman? You want to be like them?"

"I did." There was sweat on his forehead. "It broke me. Now, since I have been here, and met you, I don't want to any more."

She was silent, glad, but knowing there was something still unsolved, and wishing with all her might that she could solve it for him. She said at last:

"Perhaps it is wrong to try and change yourself."

"How could it be wrong? It isn't wrong for a thief to try and become an honest man, is it? Or for a . . . an abnormal man to become normal? You see, Sheila, you won't understand. You never knew her. My mother, I mean. I'm like her. I know it. I've always known it, inside me, though it was my father I tried to imitate and follow. Wrong to change! If you had only seen her! Why, once she attacked him. It was a mistake, I know, she was hysterical, mad——"

He put his knuckles against his mouth: the word had frightened him.

"I don't know why I talk to you like this, Sheila. I suppose I need to open up to someone, and I take advantage of you because you can't answer me back. No, that's not the reason."

She sat still, suffering as she had never known she

could suffer. To be asked for help, and not to be able to give it.

"Oh, I'm like her," he repeated. "I see it more every day. I lose my friends one by one, I make them hate me. I destroy anyone who comes in contact with me." He squeezed her shoulder and gave her a little shake. "Did you hear what I said? I shall destroy you too. You had better get out of my way."

For a moment, she turned cold, seeing the image of the hysterical mother. Then she smiled at him.

"You couldn't be bothered to do anything to me."

He stared at her, as if looking for something he could not find. Then his face relaxed.

"No. I don't think I will. It would be queer if you stood up to me where the others had failed. I have had some good tries at making you angry, but you always come back. Why, Sheila?"

She wrinkled her forehead. "It's not *me* you get angry with."

There was a silence.

David's heart began to beat loudly. There were two people in the world: he and Sheila. He dared not look at her. It had come; all these days and weeks, all their talks together, all his moods, all his advances and withdrawals, his denials of her power over him, had been leading up to this minute. He must have known it all along. His mouth was dry. The room was full of thunder. Every object in it was an avowal.

He looked at Sheila at last. She was gazing at him, her lips apart. It had come for her too.

She came close to him, with no agitation, expectant. At her touch, he uttered a small desperate sound, and flung his arms around her. Feverishly his mouth snatched

at hers, and he kissed her fiercely. Then, trembling all over, he buried his face in her neck, and held her tight.

Her arms were pinned to her sides, so that she could not hold him. Her face was lifted up, her eyes were closed. A great freedom, a great happiness opened in her heart. Now she knew. He wanted her. He needed her. And he would know how to help her comfort him. At last, he and she would be at peace.

David released her, and stood away, his hands on her shoulders.

"No," he said, in an unsteady whisper. "It's not you I get angry with."

Her heart leaped. He was hers now. There was no hurry. They had all time before them.

She laughed for sheer delight.

"You'll be angry with me if I don't get your dinner," she said. "And there are letters for you. I'll get them."

She went out, and returned, holding a bowl of flowers, with the letters in her mouth. He laughed, went across, took them from her mouth, and tried to kiss it.

"Careful!" she exclaimed. He stood back, and watched her place on the table the round glass bowl, dangerously full of water. She had filled it with the yellow ox-eye daisies that grew so plentifully in the field up the hill. He smiled once more at her immediate absorption in what she was doing. The events of a minute ago might never have happened. She appeared wholly intent upon the flowers.

I know her in essence, he thought, but not at all in the outward expression of herself. What is she, how does she live? I know her voice and the sound of her quick, short steps, as if she wanted to run, and was making herself walk. I know she can be mischievous, and yet more wise

than anyone I have met: but in little things she escapes me. I can't memorise her.

With Alison, now, it's the other way round. I have a lot of photographs of her in my mind, Alison sitting at her desk, frowning over her letters: Alison eating, with quick, neat concentration: Alison brushing her hair in front of the glass, Alison fastening her shoes, Alison cleaning her teeth, Alison giving a quick glance over her shoulder in the mirror before she goes out, Alison at the head of the table, watching the service, yet apparently given up to the man beside her: Alison dancing, as beautifully as she does everything. But I never see Alison: always Alison doing something.

Sheila was looking at him, a question in her eyes.

"I was thinking: thinking about you, if you would like to know," he said.

Any other girl whom he knew would have asked him what he was thinking. Sheila just smiled. David made a little face at her, and inspected his letters. One was from Alison.

His heart bounded, but, leaning on all the rest of himself, he smiled at the aptness of the letter's arrival. Before his resolution had time to falter, he ripped the envelope open and began to read.

Sheila watched him. Her senses, alert to all that might concern him, became taut with apprehension. She knew the writing. She had deliberately delayed bringing the letter in. Then the newspaper man had come, and her curiosity about him had been greater for the moment than her instinctive recoil from that neat envelope, full of unknown danger. After that, she had forgotten it.

David's breathing became loud. He had gone a sick white. Terror leaped on her.

"What is it, David? Oh, what is it?"

He looked at her, made to speak, but could produce no sound. Then he thrust the letter into her hand.

"Read it," he said hoarsely.

She took it obediently, and began to read, but her eyes were blurred, and the lines danced. She shook her head.

"What does it say?"

He stood as if he had not heard. She repeated her question.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It says that my wife wishes to divorce me and marry Seton Masterman."

There was a long silence. The words kept repeating themselves meaninglessly in her ears, yet she saw their importance and their message to her. She put it aside, and tried to give herself wholly to David, who was suffering. This was the moment when she must help him as she had longed to do, yet here she was, cold and numb, without power to come alive. Something frightful had happened. All that was simple had got tangled again.

David began to sway on his feet. Light glinted in his eyes, and his face became terrible.

He had been dealt a blow which had paralysed his senses, and in his first recoil from it, he looked around, like a wounded animal, for something on which to avenge himself. The room switchbacked before his eyes. It became volatile, then ran together in a confluence of mad lines that pointed at Sheila.

In his own moment of betrayal, he had been betrayed.

When he spoke, the words were at first hardly distinguishable.

"A plot," he jerked out. "A plot. You and he. What plot did you hatch up together against me, you and Seton?"



As she gasped in amazement, he pointed a quivering finger. "You knew this letter had come, didn't you? Of course you did. What's more, you were expecting it, you brought it in here to me, you took care to be here when I read it." He uttered a furious laugh. "What does it say, indeed! Look, it's all written here, I'll read it. Listen—does this convey anything to you? 'As regards actual ways and means, Seton tells me that there is a girl at the farm who would be only too delighted to partner you in providing evidence. He tells me she is illegitimate, and that her mother went the same way. My experience of you suggests that your fastidious nature would prefer to be associated with an illegitimate peasant of your own choosing than with a paid assistant.'"

His voice thickened on the last words, and he caught hold of the mantelpiece. Waves of deadly sickness were sweeping over him. She was still there, stricken and silent. He must finish with her, finish, finish, finish.

"You arranged it between you. Seton talked to you about me. I caught him at it. You pretended not to like him, to put me off the scent. Why shouldn't you like him?—Everybody does. He told you to come here and wait, and he would arrange everything the way he wanted it to go. No, you don't! You don't go out of here till you have heard it all. You must think me an almighty fool! I don't blame you if you do. Seton thought me one. No wonder he was so keen to get me down here. He tucked me safely away so that he could have a clear field, and I swallowed it, like the imbecile I was. I believed him." He held up the letter. "She says they have become attached to one another—good phrase that, Sheila, good phrase that!—they have become attached to one another very suddenly: but you and I know better, don't we?"

He was almost convincing himself. The words came tumbling out as if he dared not pause.

"Oh, you've been playing a deep game! Your mother's instinct, to begin with; and then you thought you might make something out of it. Perhaps Seton paid you—or was I to pay you? I heard you asking him if I had money. You're your mother's own daughter; and you are going one better than she did, for she let Seager slip through her fingers."

He was shouting and stamping.

"Stop looking at me! Stop looking at me, do you hear? What's the matter, can't you move? Get off to Donough. Go and goggle at *him*. Oh, I see, you are afraid I'm going to hurt you! Get out, and don't let me see you again."

He picked up the bowl of flowers and dashed it on the ground.

She was out of the room almost before it fell, and, with the sound of the crash in her ears, she was wrenching madly at the latch of the outer door. She tore her fingers, but she felt no pain. She had the door open at last, and was fleeing down the path.

It seemed only natural to see Donough approaching from the shore. She ran to him, and leaped into his arms, with such a passion of abandonment that he uttered a startled exclamation.

"Why, Sheila, my little one! What has happened to you?"

"Donough, Donough! take me away, take me away!"

He held her tight, stroking her hair, looking down at her in perplexity. He carried her to a rounded stone on a little knoll.

"Sit you there a minute. I'll be back. I have to go in and see Mr. Heron."

"*No!* You can't! You must not go in there. He has gone mad."

"Mad or not, I must fetch him. The Man with the Face is taken sick. Wait you now—I'll be back."

She let him seat her on the rock, and watched his broad back recede towards the cottage. Already the comfort of his arms and his voice had sunk into her. She sniffed once or twice, dried her eyes, and looked about her. It was going to be a beautiful sunset, but the weather was not settled. Far away to the west there was a look of rain.

It was not that she had forgotten what had just happened. She had detached herself from it, in much the same way that a child's attention can be caught in the midst of its tears, and it will look at what has been offered, and utter wondering or contented remarks, even before its breathing has settled down to normal. So Sheila, with revived interest, looked about her. By the time Donough emerged from the cottage with David, she could watch without emotion the two figures approaching.

David's face was white and drawn. He would not look at her, but stood aside as Donough stopped.

"I must take Mr. Heron across," he said. "Will you come with us?"

She gave him a quick smile and shook her head. He walked on, David keeping abreast of him. After a few paces, Donough looked back and said, "I'll not be long."

David's mind was empty of feeling. He felt physically tired, and, when they came to the slope of heather and bracken beyond the bridge, the backs of his legs ached, and he had to exert himself to get up the hill. Donough, who went effortlessly with his long, shambling stride, turned once or twice to allow David to catch up with him. They did not speak.

The tide was falling, and Donough's boat, short though the time had been, was resting on her side, with only her nose in the water. Donough walked up to her, lifted her stern, and, with a mighty shove and a shake, had her in the water.

He held out a hand to David and pulled him aboard. The sea was enormous in its calm. Donough pulled hard, making the water chuckle under the bows.

The peace, the rhythm of the oars were intolerable to David. What he had done rose in his mind and shrieked aloud. He tried to steel himself, but all his stubbornness was not strong enough. Even the force of the blow that had sent him reeling could not deaden his realisation of the way he had behaved.

He glared at Donough. Why did the fellow not ask what he had been doing to Sheila? Had he no curiosity, no feeling, no sense?

Unable to bear the silence any longer, David spoke.

"You had better lift up one of those oars and hit me over the head with it, and drop me overboard."

Donough smiled. "I have a use for you first, Mr. Heron."

David's control broke. He looked at him almost appealingly.

"I have behaved in a most brutal way to Sheila. Said the most unforgivable things to her, which are quite untrue. I—I had a terrible blow, and—I must have been out of my senses."

Not knowing what to say, Donough made a courteous little bow.

"She has been an angel of goodness to me." David persisted in his self-abasement. "She has put up with my filthy temper, time and time again, and—I was going to

say she has forgiven me—but she has never seemed to think there was anything to forgive.”

“I expect she will forgive you this time.”

David shook his head. “She couldn’t. I don’t know whether I should want her to.”

“You are a strange man, Mr. Heron. Why should you not wish her to forgive you?”

“There are some things that do not deserve forgiveness.”

Donough smiled.

“That is nonsense,” he said.

David shrugged, and looked ahead. They were in the bay where the whale had been washed up. Looking for it, David saw only a dingy, collapsed suggestion of what it had been. Then his attention was caught by something further up on the sand. A figure rose as the boat drew in, and, beside it, something was lying on the ground.

The figure turned out to be Jamie. He came down to the edge of the water and caught the boat’s nose, pulling it up. Between them, he and Donough handed David out. David felt, with novelty after long disuse, the impersonal respect given to a doctor in emergency.

Donough said something to Jamie, who shook his head. David walked quickly up the sand. He hurried because, as the memory of the last occasion rose clearly before him, he felt a growing repugnance.

Jamie was at his elbow. “He fell on his face. I turned him over, and that was all.”

David knelt down beside the still figure. The face was even more shockingly twisted than before. The one eye blazed no longer, but stared meaninglessly at the sky.

David felt the pulse. After a few seconds he looked up.

“When did this happen?”

Jamie looked at Donough. "About an hour ago," he suggested, nervously twisting his hands.

"More," said Donough. "It's an hour and more since I saw you waving, and I took a long time to fetch Mr. Heron."

"What was he doing?" David asked.

Jamie looked more confused than ever. "I was looking at the whale, to see was the backbone ready."

"He would carve things from the backbone," Donough explained.

"Yes. I was looking, and I heard a shout and he came hurrying to come to me, but before he could come to me, he stopped and fell on his face. I did not mean to vex him."

"What had we better do with him, Mr. Heron?"

"There's nothing that we can do," David said. "He's going fast."

"Should we carry him to the boat and take him back?"

"He won't bear moving." David looked up at Donough, and both men felt an understanding. "You get on with what you are doing. I'll wait with him here until it's over. Then we can take him back."

Donough bowed his head. Strong in both their minds was the wish to respect the dying man's love of solitude, to let him die where he had lived.

Donough and Jamie looked at one another.

"We have some pots still to bring in, out by the island. If Mr. Heron does not mind?"

"No, I'll stay here."

Donough hesitated, looking down with awe at the twisted face.

"Does he know anything, Mr. Heron?"

"I don't think so."

"My uncle's wife took a shock like that. The nurse said she understood all we were saying, though she could not even move her eyes to show it."

"Yes, I know. But it's not that way with him."

Donough said something to Jamie in Irish, and they moved off down the beach. David sat down beside the stiff figure and leaned his head back. There was a warmth in the sun still, though it was well down now, close to the layer of cloud on the horizon.

It was wonderfully still. The boat put out, and for a long time he heard the sound of the rowlocks and the voices of the two men, an occasional deep murmur, over the water.

Holding his knees, David found something profoundly apposite in the scene. It was as if all the confusion and anger, the cross purposes, were slipping away with what lay beside him. The crazed shouting, the leaping eye, the convulsed wreck of a face—all that was past. Death was about to wipe it out, and, though the sufferer could not see it, death was coming nobly.

David let go his knees and leaned back, his elbows in the sand. Into the emptiness of his spirit came a weary satisfaction. Irrational, ridiculous though it was to suppose any parallel between what had happened to himself and what was happening beside him, he felt deep in him that one was a symbol of the other. He resisted, as in duty bound; tried, in loyalty to his training, to deride this satisfaction, to tell himself that he was romanticising the occasion, making of it a scene from an opera, that it needed only a tenor and the quiver of violins to round it off. But the tide of satisfaction rose and covered these protestations, till only peace was left. He realised why he had sent Donough and Jamie away.

A flock of gulls appeared round the corner of the bay, flying low over the water. They were making for the rocky islets where they rested and slept. As they passed between him and the sunset, they took on a greenish colour so extraordinary that he caught his breath in the pure joy of watching them.

The bank of cloud on the horizon had darkened. Small fragments, broken from its uppermost edges, swam above it. The sea was shining from end to end, a great belt of light. Then the sun passed slowly behind one of the small cloud fragments, making its edges blaze, and throwing a tall blur of shadow vertically into the sky. David watched while the lower edge of the small cloud became intolerably bright, and the sun gleamed below it like the wheel of a golden chariot sinking through heaven's floor. The warm light came out once more in re-conquest, flowed up the sand, and covered David and his still companion.

David sighed. He was happy, as he had not been for years. He would go back, he would seek out Sheila, and tell her that she had nothing to fear from him. He would do all in his power for her and Donough. He would stay here, make himself simple, work in the fields, help Donough with the fishing, do anything, everything, to prove himself, to allay the suspicion in their minds, and atone for what he had done.

There was a sound beside him, and he kneeled over his patient. The face had changed colour. Something moved underneath it, a kind of terrible ripple and upheaval. A thick snoring noise came from the open mouth; the single eyelid fluttered.

Taking the wrist in his hand, feeling for the pulse, David spoke clumsy, comforting words, wishing the soul god-speed.

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Even had it heard, the leathery quivering flesh of the face was past all human expressiveness; and as he kneeled, David saw, as in a picture, the unhappy soul fly up into the sky, like a stone from a sling. It flew in a great arc: then gradually its speed lessened, its outline softened, until, at last, a tiny cloud, it floated in illimitable peace.

### XIII

STILL IN A dream, David looked up to see the boat returning. He watched it come to shore, and the men get out. They approached, their voices dropping to an occasional murmur. He rose, and went to meet them.

Donough looked a question, and David answered with a movement of his hands. The two stopped, pulled off their caps, and crossed themselves.

"Will we carry him down?"

David nodded. Donough stood for a few seconds, looking at the face. It had lost its repulsiveness. The humanity was gone: it was a ruin, not a face.

Donough crossed himself again, and Jamie, nervous and unhappy, followed suit.

"God rest his soul," Donough said, deep feeling in his voice. Then, taking one the head and the other the ankles, they lifted the body, and were startled to find how light it was.

At the boat, they stopped and hesitated. David understood.

"Put him with me in the stern," he said, and saw their relief.

The row was long, since they had to go right round the little promontory and in to the middle of Kilree bay. The sea, a lake of fire until the sun sank into the bank of cloud, bled violet, then in a few minutes turned to pale, unearthly green. Great rays of diffused light rose fountain-wise from behind the cloud, fingering the height

of the sky. Their radiance fell on the face of the corpse, where it leaned back beside David in the stern. Uncanny though the short voyage was, David felt no incongruity. It accorded with his mood.

As they turned the promontory and headed in towards the farm, the sky behind the mountain became pale, and, before they had come to shore, the moon had risen. They landed in two lights, the sunset at their back, the moon in front. The sea was so calm it was hard to see where was water and where sand.

Once more Donough and Jamie carried the body. As they stepped off the sand, they paused and looked enquiringly at David.

"Where shall we put him, Mr. Heron?"

David started.

"Oh, of course, bring him to the cottage. Will you carry him in?" he added. "I want to go to the farm for a moment. It's all right," he added, seeing Donough's eye upon him in anxious enquiry. "I'll see she isn't frightened. Put him in the room upstairs on the right. Then no one will see him in the morning, even if they do come in."

He nodded and made for the farm. No one was in the front, so he went round to the back and knocked on the kitchen door. There was silence, a faint shuffle, and silence again. He pushed open the door and found Elizabeth in the passage.

At the sight of him she started and imperiously barred his way.

"How is Owen?" he asked. "Is he better?"

She would not reply, she merely shook her head.

"May I speak to Sheila for a moment? Only for a moment?"

Gently he pushed past her and looked into the kitchen. It was empty.

He turned, and found her eyes fixed fiercely upon him.

"She is not here," she said.

There was nothing to do but accept what she said.

"Very well. Thank you. Good night."

He went out, and stood looking inland. In even those few minutes the moon had strengthened, and the shadows were sharp and rich. He breathed deeply and looked towards the cottage. The inland roof gleamed; the other was pale still with the light in the west.

He could not possibly go in there, to sit by himself with that corpse upstairs. He would only drink: and drink belonged to the past. He must walk, to tire himself out, so that when he got back he would sleep. This new-won peace was too precious to be risked. He knew too well how swiftly the tide of depression could flow back. If only he had been able to see Sheila, and win forgiveness from her. She would forgive him, that he no longer doubted: but it would be sweet to hear her say so, to have his mind finally set at rest.

The mountain rose before him, its shoulder a faint silver where the moon was beginning to touch it. A resolve sprang up in his mind. He would walk that way, go over the foot-hills, even climb a little perhaps, then turn and look upon the splendour of the whole huge scene in moonlight.

Before his resolution had time to weaken, he started off, striking inland over the high part of the bog, where he knew there was safe going.

Up in the little attic, crouching by her window, Sheila watched him go.

## XIV

WHY DID I not do this before, David asked himself.

He had crossed the bog and was working up the beginnings of the ridge of foot-hills. All weariness had left him. His legs, reluctant at first, loosened into a steady rhythm, which had to be varied on the bog, where there were tufts to climb and chasms to jump. The moon, in full strength, made of the bogland, with its hummocks and sudden clefts in the peat, a miniature landscape not unlike its own. With all colour gone, save the uniform flooding silver, heather grass and stone were alike, varying only as lichen varies from pale to dark. But the springy softness under foot contradicted the thought: that, and the clear night air, that poured into his lungs, and filled his body with delight.

He climbed steadily, bending forward, using the full power of his thighs, driving himself up the irregular slope. At the back of his mind something was eating, and he flung himself into the full exercise of his muscles in order to overwhelm it, to drown that stealthy nibble with the pulsing of exhilarated blood. Moonlight came to meet him, pouring down the mountain, which had lost its darkness, the peak hanging delicately poised in the sky, capped with dim silver. In front of him, above the foothills, the great ridge of the shoulder started up, swayed violently to the left, straightened itself, then swung in full magnificent curve to support the peak. The terrific energy of the line was softened and made delicate in the moonlight, which

poured down in such floods as to make a haze, and gave to the mountain the transience of a cloud.

Reaching the top of the foothills, David turned to look down at the bay. So wide was the expanse, so far-reaching, so still, that he knew no memory could ever hold it. To right and left, the world stretched away, the level of the sea, the dark smears of islands. The big headland was brought unexpectedly near, and, humbled by the height, humped itself grotesquely like a resting sheep. Beyond it were the mountains of the mainland in frozen disarray.

He looked for the little promontory, and was astonished to see it, a small comic snout, dark and chubby, as if the land had run a little way out to sea and stopped in affright. The roof of the farm gleamed, tiny and clear, but the cottage lay at a different angle. Unless it were that patch of shadow, he could not see it. He looked out past the promontory, and saw the deserted church jutting up in the moonlight, that gave it the definition and fragility of a shell. It was tiny too. He could not believe that the small height he had climbed should so reduce known objects. He had been going, he calculated, barely fifty minutes.

What must it be like higher up? He hesitated, eyeing the beginnings of the shoulder. It rose steeply now. Another half-hour would take him as high again. He would not go on to the ridge, but would make for a favourable point which he picked out on the boulder-strewn slope. He had still with him the coat which he had taken in case it should be chilly on the water. He would sit up there till the dawn came, then come back, seek out Sheila, and sleep at ease.

He pressed on again, going more slowly now, husbanding his strength for the steep part ahead. Why had he not done this before? This was the solution, to climb above

the difficulties and the animosities. It was not sentimentality; it was real. Already, several times on the shore, he had been drawn into the harmony of place and atmosphere. But, down there, he was too near all that had bothered him, too close to human disturbances.

Yet, as he well knew, the reason he had not ventured far inland was that he clung to human company. The landscape was too big: the threat of the mountain, the great slopes, the towering weight of the clouds. He dared not risk being caught by depression thus far from human kind.

The shoulder hulked above him, so steep and near that he could not see the peak, nor even the winding ridge. He began to climb a narrow gulley, in the middle of which ran a trickle of water. He scrambled up the sides, his foot slipping now and then in the soft earth, pulling himself up the steeper parts by the tough roots of the heather. Reaching the top, he denied himself the rest and backward look which he craved, keeping it till he reached his point of vantage. The view would be so much better from there: it would be worth waiting for.

The slope was less steep than the gulley for a couple of hundred yards. Then it reared up, and he took it at an angle, scrambling edgeways, tacking from side to side, making good progress. There was no difficulty at all. Any girl could have come as far, and he found himself wondering whether Sheila had ever been up there. Probably not: the Island folk never went further than they need. Walking for pleasure or taking a meal out of doors seemed to them madness.

He was going easily, picking his way among heather, flat stones, and stunted whinbushes. To avoid a patch of moss that glistened with wet, he pulled himself up above

it, and stood on a large flat stone. Just as he was about to step off the stone, it slipped sideways, and sent him sprawling against the slope. He shot out a hand, and clutched at some heather, which tore away. He slipped downwards, and felt against his thigh the wet of the moss. Half laughing, he put out his hands, to grab at anything that would stop this ignominious slither. A root held, then snapped. He twisted over on his back to dig in his heels, banged his knee on a stone, jerked upright, then felt his body drop. The one emotion in his mind was of amused incredulity that such a slip on such an easy place could mean anything more than a wet seat to his pants. The slope shot up and hit his legs a dull, glancing blow, tripping him up and sending him headlong. He fell again, was smacked by a huge soft fist, felt a click of pain in his leg, and was blotted out.

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## XV

DAVID CAME BACK from a distance so great that the fact of consciousness, and the feeling of something cold on his face, brought no sense of identification. He was aware of his sensations as a newly born animal might first be conscious of the things around it. He lay and found vague pleasure in the cold fugitive touches and the faint whispering that accompanied them.

Even a dip into memory, which made him decide that those sounds and touches were rain, did not bring him to himself. He felt a gentle surprise, sighed, and let things continue.

Then a new sensation complicated his awareness. A large throb, a kind of waveburst, was exploding rhythmically somewhere just above him, yet he was connected with it. It appeared before his mind's eye as an outsize red rubber aircushion, tilted on its side above the waves, a little way from shore: and he had no sooner named it than its substance changed to sea water, and burst regularly into spray, re-forming itself each time. Somehow, its pulsation was echoed in his knee.

A glimmer of returning reason made him dislike this picture. He tried to close his eyes, so as to shut it out, and found that they were shut already. This discovery, too, took a long time to sink in. His eyes became very big and heavy, like croquet balls, and their sockets deep, deep caves. His eyes were globes turning in a school-room. The light came in the window and gleamed on

their smooth shiny rotundity. They turned too fast for him to make out the countries on them. They hurt.

Then, with a leap forward to life, he opened his eyes, and saw in pleasure and wonder a soft brown cloud passing overhead on a sky of watery gray. Innocently he watched the cloud in its passage above him. As his eyes turned back to follow it, a sharp pain stabbed them, and he slipped back into confusion, running on seaweed-covered rocks, struggling wildly to keep his feet.

An age passed, and he awoke gently, and knew he was David Heron. Opening his eyes, he saw that it was day. Carefully he turned his head, and a frond of bracken was quite close to his face. He was lying in the open. A pause of blankness, and, as if it had all happened on a lower level, he remembered the cottage, and Sheila, and the boat.

It was all a long way below, literally, as if he were looking down on it from a height. Laboriously he arranged it to make sense. Sheila. There had been a quarrel. Yes. The monk. He had begun to climb. He remembered as far up as the gulley, but no further.

I must have fallen, he said to himself: and, pleased at having accounted for his situation, he floated off again.

The throb. The bursting ring. It was getting bigger, louder, hotter. It swelled in size and narrowed in intensity, tightening, flaming, grinding——

His body jerked, and the ring tightened like red hot iron on his leg, making him cry out, knocking the breath from him.

For minutes after that, he lay like a small animal shamming dead. That's what happens if you move, he told himself. But the ring began to rise again in the air, to get bigger, to redden. He *must* move.

He clenched his teeth, and felt the sweat start out. In an angry effort, he forced himself to take cognisance of what had happened. Slowly, with elaborate care, despite the pain, he raised his head, and squinted along himself. The agony flared out, and he lay back, gasping and sweating: but he had seen. His right leg was doubled under him.

As soon as his wits cleared, he reviewed this situation with professional calm. The throbbing had stopped, and was settling down into a vile pain. As soon as he could, he would have another look, and see if anything could be done about easing his position, and, perhaps, having a proper look at the leg.

He lay, resting, and, despite the pain, must have lapsed into dream, for his next waking hit him, violent and jagged, like a blow. With the pain came a scribble of lightning, throwing the truth into terrifying relief, swallowed by instant blackness.

*No one knew where he had gone. He was alone. He would die.*

The recognition was followed by an instant blank, a strip of blinding white light, like a tear in a film, and his mind was blotted out with light. The light became a white sheet, a white wall, and bugs of panic began to swarm fatly up it from the lower left hand corner.

He lay gasping, his heart frantic as an animal in a trap, rocking on sick waves of fear. Then, by degrees, he grew calmer, and reflected bitterly on his folly. Idiot, to think that the country would be any kinder to him than the people! There was no place for him in either world. And—now he remembered his fall—it was a fitting end for such a life: a fatuous muddy slither, a tumble down a bank. If anyone looked for him, they would look up among the rocks, at the foot of the ridge, where others had fallen.

But they would not look. They hated him. They would be glad to be rid of him. Even Sheila hated him now.

Yes. It was all of a piece. He was as pitiable a fool in death as in life. Get out, makeshift. Get out, misfit. Slide to hell, on your hinder parts, and be no more seen. You've got what you deserve—at last.

An apathy succeeded, a stillborn calm, a dream in which he left his body and floated off. Those thoughts were all past. Fear was down there, far below, with the squabbles, the shifts, the shrivelled angers.

He was an infinite distance from it now. He saw Kilree and its folk, with a dispassionate wonder. Clear, like tiny dolls, they seemed the creatures of a dream . . . Owen, Kate, the Monk, Peadar, John—where in the sane world could such a group exist? Yet, what was the sane world? Was he mad, and was it his madness which had coloured them? Had he seen or known them at all? Were they all fantasy?

Anyway, what did it matter? All worlds were alike to him now.

Far below, long ago. Far below, long ago. The jingle resounded in his mind. He listened to it, indulged himself in its melancholy, then came back to see a sentence in small cold print at the foot of a white page.

It does not matter if I die.

The words repeated themselves, over and over again. They went from mouth to mouth, they were cried, sung, whispered, in voices of every tone and hue. At first they meant nothing. Then they were the echo of a great despair. Then they sank away to a small, dark point.

It does not matter if I die.

They were still there, though transformed, white as ermine, cool and fair, when he came back from another

long journey in the dark. He watched them, happier now, more human.

Someone was in pain. Someone was taking a long time to die. He was sorry for the someone, and wandered through the streets of a town, buttonholing people and telling them, but they would not listen.

Then he was himself, David, lying on the mountain. Rain fell, making him shiver: afterwards, the sky grew intolerably bright. The mountain pressed up underneath his body, which lay on it heavy and inert, not all one body, as it used to be, but a lot of separate heavy bits held together by their envelope, like a sack with drowned things in it.

The mountain pressed up, and soared into the sky. It was like being at the bow of a ship, only it went up, higher and higher, into the limitless sky.

For a time it was marvellous to soar so high, but the pressure under his body became stronger and heavier, till at last it was bruising him. He cried and twisted. It was forcing the breath out of him, and some cruel brute began to bludgeon his leg. He screamed, and fell into blackness.

A century later he woke, limp and peaceful. He opened his eyes, and looked into the enormous sky. A great wall of cloud, dark and solid, cut the sky in half; its irregular billowing edge passed over his head. The other half of the sky was washed and pale.

He looked up, and all his fears and problems fell away. Self-pity and despair were gone. He beheld the folly of his life, its waste, its distortion. He saw himself a child, torn between father and mother; he watched the child follow, diligent as a dog, its false trail. He saw himself meet and marry Alison, he saw their struggles, he saw

them part. He saw himself come to Kilree, fail there too, and run away up the mountain.

He saw his life, with every error, every petulance, every cruelty, and knew that he had outgrown it: knew that at last, lying broken and limp upon the mountain that had contemptuously rejected him, he had found the secret: to do nothing, to lie still, to let things take their course. Now, for the first time, he was himself. Life had tried every other lesson, and, since none would serve, had given him the last lesson of all.

Happiness rose in him, as if the sun, shining on fern and heather, drew up moisture from the earth. He touched hands with everyone whom he had known, confessed his follies, and they forgave him. Sheila came before him: she smiled, with a quick light in her eyes, and forgave him. He clung to her picture, but it faded. Something he still lacked . . . something . . . the biggest thing of all. He was trembling on the edge of knowledge, like a gathering drop. Now. Now, if he could only keep still, keep passive——

The moment passed, and he fell into a dream.

He dreamed that for years he had been in a train, journeying across a blank gray country with no feature but the metal telegraph poles beside the line. The windows were on one side of the train only, and there was nothing to do but look out over this perpetual sameness. Then the journey must have ended, for he lay ill in a vast metal shed, high, cold, and void of life. He lay on a narrow bed, alone, in the middle, and every now and then ghost-like automata flitted by without seeing him, without speech. They moved fast, and twittered to one another like dry leaves, but paid him no heed. He lay, weary to death, in the inertia of a terrible boredom that had no outlet, that

never even sharpened into grief, yet was the worst misery he had ever known. He was outcast from creation. The universe, its purpose, heaven and hell, the busy whirl of the planets—he was outside it all, lost, overlooked, in a limbo of twitterers. Presently it would miss him—he knew that—but too late. He saw creation all converging, a vast, myriad-faceted kaleidoscope swirling towards unity, and he was the one lost fragment. Because of him, the design could never be whole. Because of him, the aim of ten million creations was lost. And he could not cry out, he could not even care.

Then, quietly, a light began to grow in the grayness. A cloud gathered, softly lit, consoling. It rolled apart, and he saw the garden at home, and Alison, basket on arm, come down it. She stopped at a rosebush, took out her scissors, and, holding the branches firmly in her gloved fingers, she snipped off the blooms. One was stubborn: her lips came away from her teeth as she struggled with it.

He looked at her, the dark head, the line of her stretched arm, the white skin showing through the green openwork jumper: and he knew the truth. A cry rose from the depth of his soul.

"Alison. Alison, darling. It's you I love. It's you I always loved, and always will. I was all twisted up; no wonder you wanted to leave me. But I love you for always and always."

When he looked up again, the wall of cloud had gone. The sky was clear.

The sun came out, and dazzled him. He murmured, and moved his head. Midges crawled from the bracken, and clustered on his temples and behind his ears. He rubbed at them feebly, and tried to remember his ecstasy. He

shivered, told himself it was part of his penance, and fell into a series of uneasy, pain-ridden dreams.

Noises woke him, blundering noises, as if a heavy beast were climbing. He tried to call out, but his throat was swollen and would not utter anything. The clumpings increased, and, unbelieving, he saw Donough's head and shoulders looming up beside him.

"Well, Mr. Heron," said the deep voice goodhumouredly. "You certainly give us a lot of trouble."



## XVI

DAVID OPENED HIS eyes upon lamplight, and knew at once that he was lying on his couch in the sitting room at the cottage. The fire was blazing brightly; at the edges of the ceiling its flickering disturbed the steady lamplight, which held the centre for its own.

He stirred, felt a numbing pain, and remembered what had happened. Involuntarily he shuddered at the thought of that journey down the mountain. They had carried him on the remains of a gate, Jamie and Donough, with a tenderness and a care beyond praise. Even so, the journey had been hideous, and more than once he had fainted. More than once indeed, for his memories were confused, and he did not at all remember coming to the cottage.

He turned his head, and saw Father Morrissey. The sight gave him no surprise. It was natural to see there the man who had been so often in his mind; on whom, after seeing him only twice, he had found himself in some odd way leaning. Queer, he thought, as he gazed at the squat, insanitary figure. There sat a man whom he had every reason to dislike, yet he saw him with the unsurprised acceptance of a child that wakes to see its nurse sitting by the fire.

The priest was in his shirt-sleeves, methodically preparing what David saw to be improvised splints. David wondered for a moment about his leg. How had the fracture stood the journey? It should have been all right, he told himself, once they got him on that gate. He had

not seen it, did not know if it was compound or not. Then he smiled at his own inconsistency, for on the mountain he had been ready for death, and quite unafraid.

What was the priest doing here? Of course—he had come to do the last rites for his former colleague, who lay in the room upstairs.

“I did what I could for him, Father, but it was too late.”

“What’s that?” Father Morissey looked round at him over the tops of his glasses. “Ye’re awake, are ye?”

“The monk. The man who lived in the cave. I did what I could, but it was too late. It wouldn’t have been any good, anyhow. He was likely to go off like that, at any minute. I don’t think he suffered, Father. I think he knew nothing at all.”

“So much the better.”

“It was a wonderful death. The sunset . . . I thought I saw . . .” His voice trailed off weakly. The priest got up.

“Now,” he said, “we’re going to fix ye up. I am a rough operator, I fear: but I have had training. It is necessary for these parts. Many’s the leg I have set, and with you to tell me if I am doing right——”

“Yes, I can tell you. How is it?”

“A good crack, and no harm done. It’s going to hurt, I’m afraid: I have nothing to give ye. You have nothing, I suppose?”

David shook his head. “I’ve earned it,” he said. “It’s my penance.”

“That’s no reason why it should be ours.”

David’s mind caught at the plural. He tried to raise himself. “What, is Sheila there?”

“She is. She’s going to help me. Aren’t you, Sheila?”

There was a movement at David's back, and the sound of a quick breath.

"Father! Let me have a word with her. Please. It will set my mind at rest."

"Very well. Not long, mind ye."

The priest went out of the room and closed the door.

"Sheila. Darling. Forgive me. I didn't mean it. I know you couldn't plot against me. I knew it then really, in a way. Only, when that letter came, it knocked me right over. I understood . . . " He stopped, and fought for breath. "I love Alison and——"

"I know. Don't trouble about it." She was holding his hand between hers.

"It was the old devil in me, Sheila. The last smack. It will never happen again, never. I promise you."

His voice weakened, and tears welled up under his closed eyelids. She made little comforting murmurs, and pressed his hand to her cheek.

"Sheila. Always remember. It's you that have cured me. You helped me as no one else could. Whatever happens, remember that."

"Are you going to die?"

He opened his eyes, and in a blur saw her looking down at him, her eyes enormous. In the shadow, she looked like an owl.

He smiled weakly.

"Up there, I thought I was; but now——"

The door opened. "I think we ought to get on with this. Ye'll need all your strength."

"Ought Sheila to help? I don't want to distress her."

He lay back limp and sweating. The effort and the emotion had been too much. Through a curtain he heard the priest giving Sheila instructions, and had almost for-

gotten what was to happen, when a flame of pain leaped in his leg, then ground and clamped it and hit his ribs.

He heard a scream, and fell into blackness.

. . . . .

When he woke, his leg was stiff in the splint. It hurt, but the pain had sunk to a steady glow. He noted the fact with interest, after which his mind wandered away, and stayed for a long time outside the cottage, examining objects which were lying about on the bog. The dream deepened, then ran away, and he was conscious of the room, the four walls close about him, the air loud in his ears. He opened his eyes, and at once the ceiling went back to its place, and the walls to theirs. He shut his eyes, and they returned, crowding on top of him, pressing so close that his body had to pass through them. They came closer and closer, till they met somewhere in the middle of his chest. Then they turned to ice, went away, and the whole process began again.

Disliking it, he opened his eyes with an effort, and looked for Father Morrissey. The priest was sitting close beside the lamp, reading, his head tilted back, his lower lip stuck out, looking like a studious bulldog.

"Father."

"Well."

"You were right when you said Sheila was safe with me . . . but it wasn't because I wasn't a man . . . and lacked virility; but because I love Alison. My wife."

"Have it your own way."

"I do love Alison."

"So you should."

David felt vaguely indignant, but soon could not remember what had been said. He sank into another dream, suffered,

was pursued, walked on a bog which rose up and rolled itself into enormous lumps, and the lumps began to roll together and crush him, down, down, into the yielding ooze.

He started in panic, felt the pain leap up his leg, and lay gasping, drenched with sweat. A clumsy hand was slipped under the back of his head, and he opened his eyes to see the priest's face, bloated and moon-like, close to his eyes.

The hand tilted his head up.

"Drink this," the priest said. "It'll cool ye down."

David sipped it, lay back, and sighed.

"I was having a nightmare," he said.

"Ye have a touch of fever. Small wonder, lying out there all that time. Thank your stars it wasn't cold."

David breathed as deeply as he dared. "Lungs seem all right," he said.

"Ye're right enough, if ye'll keep still."

• • • • •  
"Father."

"Yes."

"Where's Sheila?"

"Where she ought to be. In her bed."

"What time is it, then?"

"Twenty after three. Go to sleep."

• • • • •  
"Father."

"What ails ye now?"

"I do love Alison—whatever you think."

"It's well ye do. She should be here tomorrow, or the day after."

"*What?*"

"I sent for her."

"You—you sent for her?"

"And for a doctor. He'll be over tomorrow, just to make sure."

"Father." He was up on his elbow. "Did I hear you say you had sent for Alison?"

"Ye did."

"But—— How did you know where to send?"

"From her letter."

"But—if you read her letter . . ." He lay back, and shut his eyes. "She won't come."

"She should be given the chance, anyway."

David breathed heavily.

"But—Father."

"Leave her to me."

"You won't bully her, will you?"

"Go to sleep."

. . . . .

"Father. Tell me one thing, then I won't bother you any more."

"Well."

"Father—am I mad?"

"Ach. Why must ye always be dramatising yourself?"

David was offended. "I didn't know I was." He paused. "I wish you'd tell me, Father. I've a special reason for asking."

Father Morrissey turned in his chair, and looked at him fiercely over the top of his glasses.

"And what exactly do ye mean by the question? Do ye mean, are ye a certifiable lunatic?"

"N-no. I don't think I'm that, quite. But——"

"There y'are. Your question doesn't mean what it appears to mean."

He turned back to his book.

"I want you to tell me, out of your experience of people, whether I seem to you—mentally affected: or likely to be."

"Ye seem to me pretty much the regulation city neurotic, blaming his parents for everything that happens to him."

David digested this. He felt it was unfair, then supposed it was no worse than he deserved. He remembered that he had said nothing to the priest about his parents, and realised that Sheila must have told him.

"I don't *blame* my parents," he said weakly at last. "But I had a special reason——"

"Everyone since the world began thinks himself a special case. There's never been a plain ordinary adulterer. Or liar. Or anything else."

"I suppose not."

"Stop talking about yourself, and go to sleep."

"Anyway, I've changed."

"Do what I bid ye, man."

David smiled at the ceiling. He felt warm and contented.

"You really think Alison will come?"

"Go to sleep, or ye won't see her if she does."

## XVII

THE TRAIN UTTERED a wild sound, more a scream than a whistle, and clattered joyously past some sheds. Looking out, Alison Heron saw, at the end of a long curve, houses, masts, and a small harbour. At the same moment the train jerked violently, shuddered, and began to slow down.

Wearily Alison opened her handbag and looked at herself in the mirror, turning her head this way and that. She was pale from twenty hours of travel, and there were dark circles under her eyes. I look forty, she thought. With her lipstick she reaffirmed the line of her mouth, then shut the bag, stood up, and lifted her suitcase from the rack, swinging it down gracefully and easily, despite her smallness. Characteristically, she had put it up there, though there had been no one else in the compartment all the way from the junction.

Jolting and clanking, as if it were stopping against its will, the train pulled up. Alison opened the door, and stepped out, case in hand. Neat and collected, she looked about her, noticing as she did so the delicious freshness of the air.

A stout clerical figure was standing, hands clasped under coat-tails, lower jaw thrust out, looking at the train. He turned, saw her, and came towards her.

"Mrs. Heron?"

He pronounced it queerly—Hurr'n—so that for an instant she hardly recognised it as her name.



"Yes."

"I am Father Morrissey. I wired for ye."

She put her case down, and made a movement as if to catch at his sleeve. "Tell me—how is he?"

He gave her a rapid glance.

"He'll do," he said ironically. "He's not too bad at all."

The blood rushed to her face.

"You're sure?"

"He'll do," he repeated.

She stood very still for a second, then sighed deeply. "Thank goodness," she said. "I was afraid, from your wire——"

"*Were* you afraid?"

She looked at him, and met cold eyes, hostile, from across a chasm.

"I was. Did you not expect me to be?"

The priest's lower lip came out at her like an ape's.

"Mrs. Heron. All I know of ye is that ye let a sick man come down here by himself, and that, on your own admission, ye were preparing to go off with another man."

She stood silent.

"Yes," she said at last. "I suppose it looks like that." She looked away. Her eyes widened and softened. Then she lifted her chin, and her tone became cold and business-like. "How soon can I get to him, please?"

"The car will be ready in half an hour."

"Why can it not start at once?"

"Because the man is away on a job." He squared his shoulders. "Ye're tired," he said abruptly. "Ye'll be the better of some food."

"I don't want anything, thank you."

"Come up to the hotel. It's better than waiting here." Before she could stop him, he picked up her bag. "When ye see a pot of hot tea in front of ye, ye'll change your mind."

She had to follow him.

"Please don't bother about my case. Can't a porter bring it?"

"He might: but God knows when ye'd see it. That's all right. Exercise is good for me."

Alison walked beside him. He puffed, and did not go fast. Her quick wits moved around him warily, like a cat.

"How badly is he hurt?" she asked.

"He has a broken leg, with shock and exposure. I was afraid he'd get pneumonia, but by the grace of God he didn't. He's not bad at all. The doctor was pleased with him."

"How did it happen?"

"He went up Slieve Mor in the moonlight."

"In the moonlight?" She wrinkled her brow. "That doesn't sound like David."

"He was being dramatic." She stiffened, hurt by his tone. "He had a row with Sheila Brosnan—the decent poor girl of whom ye permitted yourself to write in exceedingly offensive terms: and then he was called to a dying man on the shore. When he got back, he tried to see Sheila, but she hid from him. So he dashed off up the mountain."

A thought hit her, and she turned on him sharply.

"Ah, not he! He'd never do himself harm. He slipped his foot on some wet moss."

Again she was stung by the contempt in his voice.

"I'm glad it's no worse, anyway," she said, after a

pause: and they did not speak again till they reached the hotel.

Father Morrissey was sweating. He put the case down.

"Be prepared for a clatter," he said, and thrust his bulk against the door. "Why they have that infernal machine I can't imagine," he went on, when the jangling had ceased, "for they never pay any heed to it. Nora! Where are ye? Nora—d'ye hear me?"

"Yes, Father."

The girl appeared and smiled. Alison noted with consternation how dirty she was. Had David been exposed to this kind of thing?

"Have ye the meal ready I ordered for Mrs. Heron?"

"I have, Father. Sure, I've only to wet the tea."

"Wet it quick, then. And tell Finnegan we'll be soon wanting the car. Wait! Show Mrs. Heron where she can wash herself. Did ye leave hot water there, the way I told ye? Go along with her now, Mrs. Heron, and your meal will be ready in five minutes."

Alison followed the girl to a bedroom where a jug of water stood in a basin. The washstand was dusty, and the room smelt of chill neglect: but the water was warm. She turned, and saw Nora gazing at her in frank, open-mouthed admiration.

"Thank you so much. I'll be down in a moment."

Unwillingly Nora withdrew, and Alison, averting her eyes from the fittings, did what she could to herself and went downstairs.

The priest was sitting at a little table. There was tea, a boiled egg, and toast.

"Now, Mrs. Heron. Eat it up, even if ye don't want it. Ye'll be the better of it, and the better able for your drive."

In spite of herself, Alison's dignity melted. She was tired, and her emotions were near the surface.

"This is very kind of you," she said.

"Not at all. It's a long journey from London. I know. I've done it meself. I always put in here for a meal, though me presbytery's not far off. Don't talk, now. Eat."

Alison sipped her tea, delicately chipped off the top of the egg, and began to eat. Her spirits rose. She felt at ease. The man had said unforgivable things to her, but she had not the energy to resent them. And there was something else.

She looked up, and caught his eye.

"Mrs. Heron." He leaned forward earnestly. "Is it too late? You are a woman of character and good breeding. Is there nothing that can be done about this?"

She met his eyes calmly.

"That depends on David."

He sat back, with a grunt of anger. "But your letter——"

"Father Morrissey. It is difficult to explain. I——" She looked past him, and he kept silent, watching her grimly.

"I am not accustomed to talking about my private affairs," she said. "But—well, to begin with, that letter was deliberate."

His eyes all but closed.

"Ye mean——?"

"It was a last attempt. Seton—David's doctor—and I agreed it was the only thing to do. It sounds bad, I know; but I—I was desperate."

"Ye were *desperate*?"

"Yes. I am a person who dislikes very much talking about emotional things. About things one ought to be able to take for granted. I am not built that way. It may

be foolish, but I can't help it. David wanted to marry me, and I loved him—well, that was all that was necessary. As I saw it, one got married, and went on from there. But David isn't like that. He always wanted to be digging things up, and discussing them."

He nodded, watching her.

"I did my best at first, since it seemed necessary to him. But he could not rest. He could not trust me. He seemed to resent loving me. It all seemed—poisoned, somehow."

"Of course it was."

"I don't understand."

"Your husband"—he spoke grimly, almost savagely, pointing at her with a thick, dirty forefinger—"your husband, Mrs. Heron, was the child of parents who had neither the godliness nor the decency to hide their quarrels from him. He loved them both, and his love was torn and his loyalty split in two, till conflict came to be of the very essence of love. He *cannot* love simply. It was your task to put that right in him, and ye failed."

Alison sighed.

"It was horribly difficult. I don't think you realise how difficult."

"With all respect, I think I do. A priest gets to know something of men and women, Mrs. Heron. I realise just how he tortured ye, and you tortured him."

"I?" Her eyes opened wide. "I did everything in my power to make things go smoothly. I even yielded beyond what I felt to be right."

"It isn't only by doing things that one can torture people, Mrs. Heron. One can do it just by being oneself."

She turned pale. "That is an appalling thing to say, Father Morrissey. It means——"

"Mrs. Heron. Let an old man tell ye something. You are a woman who believes in reason, and in keeping a bargain. Once you have given your word, ye stick to it."

"It is gracious of you to say that, after my letter."

He made a gesture of dismissal.

"Ye were persuaded into that, against your will. This doctor—does he love ye?"

"Yes. But, honestly, Father Morrissey, that wouldn't influence him. The letter was a manoeuvre, intended for David. Seton is a very, very honest person."

"If the manoeuvre had failed, ye would have gone with him. Ye would not lend yourself to a thing like that, or give your word, if ye were not prepared to carry it out."

She faced him quietly.

"If David did not want me . . . if my marriage was smashed anyhow . . . I might as well go to someone who did."

"Even if it ruined his career?"

"It wouldn't have done that, if I had divorced David."

"Pah!" The priest's nose wrinkled as if at a bad smell. "Lives without God. Lives without God. No wonder ye get in messes, and are wretched, if ye pay no heed to the laws of God and man."

"I know you must see it that way, of course."

"You do not?"

"No. I have my code."

"God's code is better. Life is simpler for us than for you, Mrs. Heron. However, that is not what I wanted to say. You are a very intelligent woman, Mrs. Heron, but you are deficient in imagination. When your sort marries a man, ye have it all thought out, ye have decided ye want to do it, and your decision is final."

"But of course."

"Any characteristics the man has, any tricks, ye have accepted. They are part of the man ye want to marry. Even though he may develop new ones, which irritate ye, ye don't allow yourself to be irritated."

"One can't have everything one's own way."

"No. But your husband isn't like that. His type is capable of being maddened by what attracted it. You irritated him, and when ye put him in the wrong through not being irritated by him in the same way, he had to hurt ye, to behave badly, in order to break your composure. Am I right?"

She looked at him wonderingly.

"I suppose you are," she said slowly. "At any rate, that is how he did behave. I didn't seem able to do anything right."

"Ye couldn't. Whatever ye did, he'd distort it, to keep himself in the right. Had ye not the sense to see that?"

"That's what Seton said. We hoped that, if he went away by himself——"

She broke off, as Nora appeared in the doorway.

"The car, Father."

Alison sprang up at once. The priest rose too.

"Right. In a minute." He turned to Alison.

"Ye will find him humble and eager to do his best. He loves ye, and nobody else."

"You are sure?" Her dignity was gone. She spoke as simply as a child.

"As far as he is capable of love, he loves ye. It is for you to teach him. Get along, now."

"You are not coming?"

"No. I have lost two or three days already."

"We owe you a lot, Father Morrissey. And, after all, we are no concern of yours."

"If ye come into my parish, ye must take the consequences. Goodbye now."

He saw her into the car, and watched it drive off. She turned and waved. He waved back, a queer, uncouth gesture, and went back for his hat.

In the doorway stood Nora, gazing after the car.

"Isn't she lovely!" she exclaimed, in a hushed voice of awe.

Father Morrissey stuck out his chin at her.

"Say your prayers, girl," he thundered. "Say your prayers, and thank the good God for making ye what ye are."

He pushed by the startled girl, grabbed his hat by the crown, stuck it on his head, and walked off into the sunshine.



## XVIII

ALISON PULLED A chair to the sofa and sat beside David. She smiled down in indulgent compassion.

"You poor darling. You *have* had a time. It must have been horribly painful."

"It was. I'm glad. If one feels ashamed of oneself, it's satisfactory to pay for it in so good and simple a way."

"How like you that is."

"I've changed, Alison. I'm quite different."

"Are you, darling?"

"Father Morrissey saw it."

She wrinkled her nose. "He's the most extraordinary man. He met me at the station."

"He's not here, is he?"

"No."

David sighed. "You know, he doesn't care a damn about me, really. He despises me. Yet I like him."

"I like him too. He behaved in the most unwarrantable manner. Gave me a dressing-down the moment he met me. It was the grossest presumption, and I ought to have been furious. Yet, somehow, I wasn't."

"He's like that. One feels that it's impersonal. That—that he has authority."

"He has none over us."

"No. I meant absolutely."

"He certainly behaves as if he thought so."

There was a silence. David played with the cool tips of her fingers.

"Alison."

"Yes?"

"Is it too late?"

"Your leg, you mean?"

"You know I don't mean that. I mean, for us." He caught her hand tightly. "*Must* you go off with Seton?"

"Not if you want me."

"*If!* My God——"

"Now, now. Don't get agitated."

He swallowed twice. "You—you know I want you," he said unsteadily.

"I tried hard to think so, darling. But you had rather an odd way of showing it."

"I know. I was a swine. But it's all changed now, I promise you."

He lay still for a minute, then said, "But, Alison. That letter."

"Something had to be done, darling. We thought it was the only way to bring you to your senses."

"Well I'm damned." He felt so light inside, he thought his body would rise in the air. Then a thought struck him. "Seton—it isn't all a game for him."

"I'm afraid it isn't."

"Then?"

"If you didn't want me, I might as well go to someone who did."

He sighed deeply, and pressed her hand against his cheek.

"You know, it's odd."

"What's odd? That you want me?"

"No, silly. It's odd about your sending me here. You were right, yet in quite the wrong way. It has cured me, but not at all in the way you intended."

"Never mind, as long as you're better."

She got up, and went to the window. He watched while she took out her little mirror, frowned, and proceeded to touch her mouth with lipstick.

"Alison." His eyes blurred with tears. "We'll start all over again."

She did not answer for a moment. She was looking to see if the effect was right.

"Of course we will, darling," she said.

## XIX

THE FIRST PLAN had been to move David by boat to the harbour town, so as to save him from the bumpy road. But a swell set in which would make it very difficult to get him on board, and he was so much better that the doctor, on his second visit, urged that the journey be made as soon as possible. He wanted to get David to civilisation quickly, to keep the leg from stiffening up.

David's one regret was that he had not seen more of Sheila. Alison, with her characteristic magnanimity, had tried to get the girl to come, but Sheila was shy of her, and very elusive. She came twice, for a few minutes, but was ill at ease and had little to say.

Sheila's mind was quite clear. He belonged to Alison, he was going, and the sooner he was gone the better. His place in her mind was secure, and she would never forget him. He had put her in command of new territory in herself, which, but for him, she would never have known. She would always be grateful to him for that. But his part was over. She shrank from Alison's clear, managing friendliness. Every line of that small perfect form, every fold and hang of the neat faultless tweeds, the very way Alison put her handkerchief to her delicate nostrils, was a reproach to Sheila, telling her mercilessly what an uncouth creature David must have found her.

Her future was here, with Donough. The sooner David's wife took him away the better.

Alison made the arrangements for the journey easily and with skill. After a minute, she had the driver of the van eating out of her hand, till he thought it a privilege to make an extra journey in order to be her messenger. So, at ten of a fine sunny morning, David was half helped, half carried out of the porch into the breeze and sunshine.

They held him propped up in the gateway, to get his breath. He looked round on the familiar scene, and did not want to leave it.

"We must come here again, when I'm well."

"It would be lovely."

He looked up towards the farm. Sheila was away, he knew. She had sent a message by Alison, bidding him goodbye. As he looked, he saw Owen, a white bandage still about his head, get up from where he had been sitting in the sun, and creep unobtrusively out of sight.

David sighed. He would have liked to make friends with him, to apologise, and have by-gones be by-gones. It was too much to expect, he knew. The old man regarded him as the origin of all that had happened, and would be thankful to see him go. It was natural.

"Now, darling. Do you feel ready?"

Alison's clear articulation, musical and efficient. He smiled. How much he owed to that efficiency. How much he was going to owe to it. And how easy it would be to make her happy, by leaving to her all the apparatus of life, all the mechanism, and keeping the secret places in his own mind.

The drive was easy. Even lying back as he was, he could see the road. They passed close to Donough's cottage. Smoke was coming from the chimney, and there was a pile of lobster pots at the back, but no sign of Donough. David

felt a queer twist of the heart, a kind of homesickness: then the big powerful car began to climb the headland. Beyond was the sea, baby blue, flecked with little white horses. I never saw Seager's view after all, David thought, as they reached the top, and he knew that it lay stretched out behind him.

Soon they were in the village, all white and washed with sunshine, just recognisable as the place he and Seton had charged through in puddle and rain only five weeks before. Five weeks! in which his whole life had been changed. He sank into a wondering dream, hardly seeing the things by the roadside which Alison pointed out. She was delighted, especially by the frequency of the goats and donkeys, and by the few women they passed, with shawls over their heads, who got out of the road and stood to stare as the car went slowly by.

The town came all too soon. Passive, David allowed himself to be decanted and propped up on the station platform. The breeze came sweetly across, and gulls, incredibly white and pure, screamed and squabbled, rising and circling close above the heads of the few waiting travellers. David looked along to McLaughlin's, but there was no sign of the old man or his assistant.

"Look," Alison said. "There's Father Morrissey."

David turned his head stiffly, and beheld the stocky shape of the priest. Father Morrissey, his clothes grimier and dingier than ever in the sunlight, was looking at some barrels of fish, and tapping them with his stick.

"I'll call him."

"Don't," David said. "He's seen us all right."

Without looking, the priest came slowly along towards them. Alison, tactful as ever, went to confer with a porter about their luggage.

"Good morning, Father."

"Well. How are ye?"

Father Morrissey's voice was uninterested. He did not listen to David's reply.

"That's a nice little boat, now," he said, pointing with his stick. "I'd fancy that."

"I'm afraid I've given you all a lot of trouble, Father."

"Oh, don't concern yourself."

"You mean, don't flatter myself."

The priest grunted. He looked up at the gulls, following them with his eyes. "By the way, I've a bit of news that will please ye. I'm calling the banns for those two on Sunday."

David lay back. "I'm glad."

A young porter came out of an office, and threw something from a basin into the sea, almost in front of them. At once the gulls screamed and rose in wild commotion. They dropped on the water, rose, dropped again, and other gulls came to join them, till the air was a confusion of white wings. David tried to pick out one and follow it, keeping his eyes on the orange beak and little expressionless eye, but he became dizzy and had to stop.

Alison was beside them. She had to raise her voice above the din.

The priest turned. He had not shaved.

"Here's your train coming in now."

An amateurish clanking and puffing added itself to the noise of the gulls.

"Well, Mrs. Heron. Take care of him. Goodbye. Goodbye."

He shook hands perfunctorily.

"Goodbye, Father. And thank you, more than I can say."

The priest made a gesture of dismissal. The porter, at Alison's direction, began to get David into the train. At the carriage door, he turned his head, and had a last glimpse of Father Morrissey, prodding the barrels, and meditatively picking his nose.



XX

“THIS CAME FROM Mr. Heron, Father.”

The priest took the letter suspiciously, licked his thumb, opened it, and read.

Campden Hill.  
London.

July 28th

MY DEAR SHEILA,

I am writing to wish you and Donough all possible happiness and prosperity in your new life together. No one knows better than I what a lucky man he is: and you are lucky too. I have the greatest respect and liking for him, and, what is more important, so has Father Morrissey—and he isn't easily impressed.

My wedding present to you is a gramophone and some records. I know Donough will like it, and I believe you will too: but, to be on the safe side, I am sending some books as well. He will probably laugh at them, but I can rely on you to keep your end up there!

I am happy too—thanks to you, and to Kilree. What happened to me on Slieve Mor was not just a flash in the pan, a sentimental ecstasy. It was real. I told Father Morrissey about it, when he was looking after me at the cottage, as best I could, and asked him if he thought it was true: and, characteristically, he told me that it was up to me to make it true. He was right, of course, though “keep it true” would have been better.

I remember, the day I came to the cottage, and ran in without stopping to speak to you all, Seton black-guarded me and told me I could never see anything or anybody for a single minute except from my own selfish point of view. I was furious: but, of course, he was right. I see now that all that abnormal sensitiveness, that identifying of myself with suffering people which hindered me as a doctor, was sheer selfishness. It all had to happen to ME. And, as a result, I had to be always defending myself against the world and the people in it. And the easiest way to defend myself was to get on their side. And the easiest way to get on their side was to be like them.

*You* got me out of that. You taught me that my job was to be myself, the self I was born with. You taught me to keep still and take things as they came. I can see you frowning, and looking puzzled, and saying you did nothing. But it isn't what one does that teaches people. It's what one is. You and Father Morrissey have had more real influence over me than anyone, because you have neither of you tried to do anything to me.

I told you, before I left here, that I was different: and I am. I am going to make Alison happy. She still loves me, by a miracle, and I'm not going to let her down again. It isn't going to be easy, for one can't change one's whole way of life in an instant: but I know now the lines to go on, and I'm no longer forcing myself against the grain. All the life I have now is an extra, an unexpected gift. On Slieve Mor I was ready to die. Instead, I'm alive. I've been born again.

Well, my dear—I can never thank you properly for all you did. Instead, I just thank you for being Sheila,

and hope that Sheila Rourke will never look back with regret to the days when she was Sheila Brosnan.

My love to Donough, and to yourself.

Yours ever,

DAVID HERON.

"H'm," said the priest, handing it back. "Solemn divil. He loves himself, doesn't he? I, I, I."

"It is good of him to send the gramophone," said Donough.

"Let me look at those books, child, before ye read them."

"Yes, Father."

Father Morrissey got up and put on his hat.

"It looks like rain," he said. "Good day to ye now."

Donough looked up at the sky.

"It will be heavy rain, Father," he said. "Let you wait. The van will be here soon."

As the priest hesitated, Sheila spoke.

"Come inside, and wait till it comes. Owen will be glad to see you."

"Very well."

They turned and went towards the house. Donough held back, and let Sheila take the priest in. He stood, looking about him.

The afternoon was clear and still. The dark sea gleamed like quicksilver, and the horizon seemed so actual, so clearly drawn, that at any minute the sea might spill away backward over the world's brim. A cloud reached from the top of Slieve Mor to the rocky islands. Looking up into it, Donough saw that it moved in slow perturbation, like smoke trapped beneath a ceiling.

A heavy drop hit the ground, heard but not seen: then

another: then another. One fell on the path, a single startling spot as big as a penny. The brown donkey, standing beside the outhouse, lifted up his head and sent his forlorn bray pealing across the estuary: remaining, with outstretched neck and open mouth, in ecstasy for several seconds after the outcry had ceased.

As if released by the noise, the drops quickened, and rain began to fall heavily about fifty yards from the farm. Far away to the left, on the white coil of road winding down the headland, a black speck crept, then was blurred in the thickening curtain. It was the van.

Donough stood in the doorway, his great legs straddled apart, smelling the rain. It rushed suddenly on the roof, and he uttered a deep rumbling sound in his chest.

He was content.







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